

# **Schools as professional learning communities**

ARTHUR DASH

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## **TTUTA**

### **Part II**

THE PROFESSIONAL learning community (PLC) in a school should emphasise three basic components:

1. Collaborative work and dialogue among school personnel.
2. A strong and consistent focus on pedagogy within that collaborative work.
3. The gathering of assessment and other data to inquire into and evaluate progress and problems over time.

A strong PLC will bring together the knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers and administrators to promote shared learning and improvements. It becomes a social process for turning information into knowledge; a piece of social ingenuity based on the principle that new ideas, knowledge creation, inquiry and sharing are essential to solving learning barriers in a rapidly changing society.

Unfortunately, overly standardised and top-down management systems can severely restrict teachers' discretion and involvement in decision-making, thereby negating the establishment of such communities. This paradigm has no place in modern education systems, for principals who insist on hugging power and making all the decisions in the school will not lead the development of a PLC.

The concept of teacher leadership now takes on new meaning and becomes a precondition for the establishment of a PLC. Teacher responsibility and teacher accountability are now brought sharply into focus.

PLCs exert their effects slowly, yet sustainably over time. They provide clear and distinct linkages to improved standards of learning. Their success depends also on continuing support from outside the school; hence external linkages must be formed and strengthened. Leadership styles must be transformative with a high level of participatory democracy.

Old leadership notions of structure being used as a form of control must be replaced with modern notions of power coming from the bottom, in order for PLCs to evolve and flourish. Practices such as clinical supervision and instructional leadership must be established as standard procedures in schools.

Teachers must be engaged in continuous reading and research to remain au courant with the modern research findings and theories that impact upon their practice. Being a professional carries with it the expectation and understanding that one keeps abreast of the latest developments in one's field and teaching should be no different.

As self-directed, life-long learners, they are expected to take the necessary steps to ensure they are constantly refining their knowledge base because the world of learning is dynamic.

In addition, teachers and schools must develop the habit of establishing partnerships and linkages with institutes of higher learning so that they can benefit from their research capacity.

Educators must also develop the habit of engaging in professional dialogue on a continuous basis, within and outside their school. This is one of the first steps in the process of sharing best practices.

TTUTA's annual professional development day should not be seen as a day off but rather the opportunity should be embraced as a means of engaging in such professional dialogue. Each school should have established professional development committees whose mandate is to identify and embrace every professional development opportunity, commensurate with staff needs.

Workshops and training sessions must be an ongoing practice. At present, schools can engage in such sessions at least once per term, yet sadly many administrators fail to embrace this opportunity to professionally develop their staff.

Action research teams can also be formed in each school, charged with the mandate of diagnosing the problems and challenges that face the school and arriving at solutions, thereby tapping into the tremendous knowledge base existing in every school.

In this way some of the unique problems that schools face can be adequately tackled using indigenous resources. Parents and other stakeholders must not be left out of the process, since they represent a vast resource base that can be accessed for the benefit of the school. In this way the picture of the PLC can be complete.

PLCs place a premium on teachers working and learning together, collectively striving towards the improvement of student learning outcomes. It is a place where teachers, administrators and students are learning from and with each other. Professionalism is thus seen as a continuum that is driven by the changing imperatives in education.

Teachers must be seen to operate as leaders, exercising and expressing their vast skills and experiences towards the advancement of school goals. The concept of educators thinking and operating out of the box must become the norm in schools as they face the challenges of modern-day schooling.

The idea of being revolutionary in the approach to education must now become a reality in the minds of educators.