Best Practices in the Mentoring of Learning Communities to Increase Student Achievement

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Abstract

A brief review of the contemporary writing and thinking of learning communities in P-12 education. Can learning communities revitalize education and provide sustainable leadership that maintains the community and capacity within the school setting? What are the implications for supervision within learning communities? This paper offers a review of the literature and some thoughts and perspectives on community creation and sustenance.

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We live in a time of great social and political upheaval and everywhere schools and educational leaders are looking for direction. The methods of the past have left us reeling. Increasing pressure from bureaucrats in Washington and in state government to meet high standards have left many schools in a quandary. How can schools meet high standards without further fracturing the communities in which they operate? How can teachers reclaim their vigor? What is required of leadership and how can it be more authentic? How can schools become authentic communities that create opportunities for learning and high achievement? The social fabric of our nation has been torn asunder. More and more of our students are coming from single parent homes. Many in poorer areas are witness to conditions that few of us could have imagined ten years ago. Some are affected by generational poverty, some by parents recently unemployed due to global forces that have thrown our economy into a maelstrom, others by divorce, some are children of an incarcerated parent. Our climate of high stakes testing creates yet one more hurdle that today's student face that students of a generation ago could never have imagined.

Ubuntu is an African concept that might point the way to a new approach to learning. Desmond Tutu (2000) said “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are oppressed.” We need such a spirit and environment in our schools. Such a spirit can invite a community of learners.

Most of the structures invite us to hospitality and communion with each other are noticeably absent in schools. Sir Ken Robinson (2009) has said that children learn best when they learn from each other and when their teachers are learning with them. Developing and maintaining an effective learning community is a way of simultaneously addressing the many needs of today's students and schools (Lunenberg & Irby, 2005 in Blankstein, 2004) The International School Standard Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standard 1 states, "An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008).

Communities are more than the people they contain and this is especially true of learning communities. Communities are more than groups of people sharing a space. They are groups of people who are united in purpose and as a unit posses more than the mere sum of the parts. Henson (2010) describes a successful learning community containing certain attitudes which in turn shape behavior. He goes on to say that a school is the ideal size learning community. An effective learning community has a common mission and goals (Henson, 2010). The mission is based upon a vision and ethos. The importance of an operative ethos is imperative and from this ethos a vision and mission can be created which reflects the community and ordains its capacity and informs the goals of the community which sustain and drive its progress.

This review features the work of a number of individuals whose work contributes to the concept of the establishment of learning communities.

Parker Palmer has written numerous books on educational community and authenticity. He is the founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal and among their programs is Courage to Teach® and Courage and Renewal for school leaders. Palmer's Courage to Renewal's goals

are, revitalized leadership that invites untapped potentials, passions, and talents of their faculty and students. Increased capacity to cultivate the kind of trustworthy relationships required to create a positive school culture in which teachers and students flourish. Courage to Teach® helps educators create safe spaces and trusting relationships in their schools, with their students and colleagues, and within their communities and explores the connection between attending to the inner life of educators and the renewal of public education.

Michael Fullan is Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Recognized as a worldwide authority on educational reform, Michael is engaged in training, consulting, and evaluating change projects around the world and his books have been published in many languages.

Alan Blankstein is founder and president of the HOPE Foundation, a not-for-profit organization. He is former "high-risk" youth who began his career in education as a music teacher. He is the author of the bestselling book, "Failure Is Not an Option®: Six Principles That Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools" (Corwin, 2011). HOPE Foundation collaborates with schools, using research-based materials and on-site, embedded professional learning practices, they try to build shared and sustainable leadership capacity needed to produce highly effective teachers and administrators, exemplary schools and extraordinary outcomes (Hope Foundation, 2010).

Dr. Mike Schmoker is a former school administrator, English teacher and an educational consultant. He has authored numerous books among which are "Key to Continuous School Improvement," "Practical Strategies from Dramatically-Improved Schools," and he is the author of a large number of articles. (Schmoker, n.d.)

Dr. Kenneth Henson is Professor of Education at the Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina and the author of numerous books including our text. Henson has published forty-two books dozens of articles. Milbrey W. McLaughlin is professor emerita of education and public policy, founding director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, and co-director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching at Stanford University. Dr. McLaughlin's research combines studies of K-12 education policy in the U.S and work on the broad question of community-school collaboration to support youth development. (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2011). Sir Ken Robinson For twelve years, he was Professor of Education at the University of Warwick in the UK and is now Professor Emeritus. He is an internationally recognized leader in the development of creativity, innovation and human resources (Robinson, n.d.). Joan E. Talbert is senior research scholar and Co-Director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC) at Stanford University (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2011). Dr. Richard DuFour is regarded as one of the nation's leading authorities on bringing professional learning community concepts to life in the real world of schools. A public school educator for 34 years, he has served as a teacher, principal and superintendent (AEI Speakers Bureau, 2009). Andy Hargreaves is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. He was the co-founder and director of Centre for Educational Change at the Ontario Institute. Dennis Shirley is professor at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. He assists beginning teachers in complex school environments. He was the first U.S. scholar to document the rise of community organizing as an educational change strategy (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009)

Blankstein (2004) says that it is more common to find school professionals who say they are part of a learning community than to actually find a professional learning community in operation. Blankstein's (2004) six principles of a learning community are:

Principle 1 – Common mission, vision and goals

Principle 2 – Ensuring achievement for all students: creating systems for prevention and intervention

Principle 3 – Collaborative teaming focused on teaching and learning

Principle 4 – Using data to guide decision making and continuous improvement

Principle 5 – Gaining active engagement from family and community

Principle 6 – Building sustainable leadership capacity

These standards mirror the ISLLC Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). McLaughlin & Talbert (2010) define professional learning communities as a group of individuals who share a goal and work together to achieve the goal, assess their progress, make corrections, and hold themselves accountable for achieving their common goal. Typically, people think of teachers in learning communities. Professional learning communities can be principals across schools in a district. Central Office can function as a professional learning community. Professional learning communities can be teachers too in grade-level teams in elementary schools – or in high school subject departments, or cross-discipline teams working with the same set of students. Such groups are PLCs to the extent that they are doing joint work together and have norms of collaboration and mutual accountability.

Defining a professional learning community is only part of the equation and the purpose of this paper is to examine what the best practices are in mentoring these communities and their impacts on student achievement and supervision of instructional staff. Palmer (2010) states that

it is no wonder that many educated people lack the capacity to enter into and help create community and that is because they carry the habit of competition into all their relations with life. If we believed that knowledge arises from the commitments of communities as some new epistemologies tell us then we would create classrooms where community is fostered and not feared. This insight is keen because it is necessary to create a community of learners that is cooperative and collaborative and that innate spirit of competition that he speaks of is kept to a minimum or eliminated as nearly as possible. Competition polarizes a community and ultimately stifles achievement. Joan Talbert (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010) believes that the social-normative side of the equation which includes trust and support for risk taking is key and that leadership, and modeling the priorities of collaboration and data use are equally important. Blankstein (2004) is quick to assert that the development and attention to the "soft side" is important to the success of both the community and ultimately the achievement of the students themselves. Failure to address these soft issues often results in the failure of the initiative. The human aspect of school change is the most difficult, yet essential element for success. Perhaps because of this it is often overlooked, minimized or dismissed (Blankstein, 2004).

Professional learning communities comprise groups of educators, administrators, community members, and other stakeholders who collectively examine and improve their own professional practice. Typically, individual groups are small and meet regularly over a significant period-of-time. (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d.) Annenberg Institute states that professional learning community participants must collaborate effectively, working as a team and taking collective responsibility for the group's outcomes. Professional learning communities need a shared mission and vision, as well as shared norms and values to under-gird the work and inform the goals.

Professional learning communities (PLC) provide multiple opportunities for schools to improve instruction and outcomes for students which lead to high performing schools. PLCs promote positive cultural change. Many teachers and administrators find the opportunity to meet with colleagues and openly reflect on practice to be a welcome change from the isolation and focus on individual effort that characterize the traditional professional context of education. These cultural changes, to which PLCs contribute, result in positive indicators for academic improvement, including decreases in dropout rates and absenteeism, increased learning with a focus on equity (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d.)

Deep-seated issues of trust and equity are often not addressed. Participating in regular meetings created opportunities for interaction and served to decrease the sense of inherent isolation and to increase feelings of collegiality among groups, yet deeper issues of trust and equity were often unad- dressed. In addition, groups functioned primarily as entities unto themselves and rarely engaged in conversations about how and what they were learning and doing could be used to inform each others' practice and to improve learning conditions and achievement levels for students within schools and across districts. (Annenberg Institute for School Reform)

Central to the success of high achieving schools is a collaborative culture focused on teaching and learning (Blankstein, 2004). The creation of such a culture is not easy either as it requires a sustained effort. According to (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996 as cited in Blankstein, 2004) there are four cultural types: Individualistic, Balkanized, Contrived Collegiality and Collaborative. Individualistic school cultures regard the presence of another adult in the room as an invasion of privacy. The Balkanized culture is characterized by instructional cliques that are often deep rooted. Third is a culture described as contrived collegiality which is best summarized

as teachers who appear to be collaborating but they do not focus on deep issues necessary to the establishment of a truly collaborative environment which is the fourth type of culture.

Blankstein (2004) describes this final type of community as one where each individual is fully committed to helping students learn by becoming active learners themselves. Teachers in a collaborative culure make specific analyses of data to discover ways of improving teaching and learning (Blankstein, 2004). Collaboration is the means to an end that enhances teaching and learning. Key to this collaboration is the creation of a community of trust and respect. This is much easier said than done but the success of the community ultimately hinges on this extremely important point. Strong leaders engage teachers in meaningful collaboration and support their activities. The school is characterized by a culture of mutual trust and respect that celebrates the open sharing of ideas for different approaches and teaching styles (Blankstein, 2004). Palmer (2004) says that a supervisor who leads from personal authenticity gets better work out of people than one who leads from a script. Such a person creates transparency and fosters a culture of mutual trust and respect that is essential to the formation of a successful learning community. These collaborative entities must contain many of the elements of a circle of trust. Common ground is especially critical in setting like public schools where pluralism must be maintained (Palmer, 2004). Palmer (2010) goes on to state that, “education in truth must bring teacher and students into a troth with each other into the very image of the truth it hopes to convey.” Troth implies a loyalty, a commitment to each other and to ourselves. There is no doubt that an effective learning community is a sacred bond among all constituents.

Three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community: What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? The last

question is what separates a learning community from a traditional school. (Dufour, 2004) Systems must be in place identify those students needing help and there must a method of getting them the help they need to be successful learners. Learning then becomes a community issue and is not left to teachers isolated from each other in traditional classrooms. The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn.

This simple shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning has profound implications for schools (Dufour, 2004). Dufour (2004) states, when a school begins to function as a professional learning community, however, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The core question moves from what am I teaching to what are my students learning. Dr. Mike Schmoker's concept of professional learning communities is that teachers, working in groups, should study relatively short-term cycles of teaching and learning, borrow and generate ideas for improving practice, put them into action, and study the results. Improved student learning will ensue. (Joyce, 2004)

Central to that study is the use of data to inform the collaborative inquiry. Both Schmoker and Dufour agree that high levels of collaboration are needed and it is relatively easy to see that the school needs to be remade into a community where deep and meaningful discussions become the rule rather than the exception. Even school districts that devote tremendous time and energy to designing the intended curriculum often pay little attention to the implemented curriculum (what teachers actually teach) and even less to the attained curriculum (what students learn) (Marzano, 2003) in Dufour, 2004). Therefore it is essential that a true collegial community exist as described by Blankstein (2004). Balkanized and contrived collegial learning communities

cannot have the kinds of discussions about what students are learning until these barriers are surmounted.

Milbrey McLaughlin speaks for many esteemed educators and researchers when she asserts that the most promising strategy for sustained school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community. However such learning communities rightly defined are extremely rare (Schmoker, February 2004). There is remarkable, concurrence among members of the research community on the effects of carefully structured learning teams on the improvement of instruction. Add to this that such structures are probably the most practical, affordable, and professionally dignifying route to better instruction in our schools (Schmoker, February 2004). If this is the case then why is there such reluctance to move rapidly in the direction of professional learning communities. Therefore a successful learning community includes capacity building in which teachers and students clearly articulate their learning targets, success criteria and instructional actions. The community includes job-embedded professional development in which teachers model lessons in one another's classrooms (Fullan, 2010).

Joan Talbert (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010) also states that a data system that can manage formative assessment data in a very quick turnaround is key if teacher professional learning communities are to use it to continually improve instruction. In New York City schools are buying their own software so that teachers can enter the data and analyze it and get results within days. It requires technical investments at all system levels to get useful data. (Love et al, 2008) state that for thirty years, educators have introduced innovations aimed at improving student outcomes. Yet, time after time, professional development, curriculum adoption, policy changes and other interventions fail to be fully implemented because there is lack of followup and

monitoring to assess whether the change has been made. Best practices dictate that a data driven followup is imperative and that the data include both formative and summative measures and that a pre-determined norms have been established that limit or eliminate competition or polarization. Data can be used first to determine what kinds of goals need to be established and then to determine whether a goal has been achieved (Blankstein, 2004) The data needs to be disaggregated and it must be current. One element of an effective learning community is adroitness in using data for instructional decision making. Ensure that an array of data on student performance is available in a format that teachers find understandable and that invites interpretation. You may need to help staff members acquire skills needed to interpret data, perhaps bringing in a seasoned professional to guide them (Hord, S. M., & Hirsh, S. A. 2009, February). The use of summative evaluations given once a year is useful but will not answer all the questions of those teachers involved in collaborative inquiry and cannot effectively inform practice and or teaching and learning. Although it may seem that data can be used most effectively to identify problems within a school. It can also target strengths that can be made even stronger Teachers in high performing schools do not view data as abstract. They consider it part of an on-going process (Blankstein, 2004).

Freeport Intermediate School, located 50 miles south of Houston, Texas, attributes its success to an unrelenting focus on results. Teachers work in collaborative teams for 90 minutes daily to clarify the essential outcomes of their grade levels and courses and to align those outcomes with state standards. The teachers develop consistent instructional calendars and administer the same brief assessment to all students at the same grade level at the conclusion of each instructional unit, roughly once a week

Freeport Intermediate has been transformed from one of the lowest-performing schools in the state to a national model for academic achievement. That change came about when teachers began to focus on results and talk about those results in the context of professional learning communities. (Dufours, 2004)

Roland Barth (1991 in Dufours 2004) wrote, Are teachers and administrators willing to accept the fact that they are part of the problem? . . . God didn't create self-contained classrooms, 50-minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. We did because we find working alone safer than and preferable to working together. Changes are needed in central office too if the culture is to change for the benefit of teachers and student and we are to achieve the promise of professional learning communities. Joyce (2004), thinks you have to disseminate to teachers on one hand and to superintendents, central office folks, and principals on the other. Those in the latter category are the agents for changing the structure of the workplace. Central office folks need to be deeply involved in the process and need to create structures that small teams of teachers and most schools cannot make without their help. Effective learning communities are democratic and participatory. Joyce (2004) envisions the development of cadres of teachers who serve their colleagues regularly and of central office folks and principals who serve by developing facilitative structures and joining the learning communities.

Joyce (2004) said, they introduced teacher candidates to professional learning communities while they were in training and gave them tools for studying teaching — tools known as “interaction analysis systems.” Teacher preparation programs need to be realigned to prepare teachers to enter such learning communities as students. The entire education paradigm must change to support a culture that moves schools away from compartmentalized and isolated organizations.

Nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and family/community working together in partnership (Fullan, 1997 in Blankstein, 2004) The relationship between schools and communities and especially parents within that community can be rocky, yet nothing is more important when it come to achieving success in a learning community. The learning community must therefore include a collegial relationship with parents too. Schools that have become true professional learning communities have addressed the school community gap and closed it. Blankstein (2004) identifies three key principles necessary for effective family relationships.

1. Building mutual understanding and empathy
2. Effective involvement of family and community
3. Reaching out to family and community

Schools can reach out to families by becoming more empathetic with them. Removing penalties for students not attending school and working with students and parents to overcome obstacles to attendance and non-compliance with school issues. Reaching out to families in their own language when confronted with language barriers. Working with other local agencies to provide quiet places for students to study and access educational resources. In other words the families are viewed as essential to the learning community and not merely a consumer of education. Professional learning communities need to reach out to their local business community as well.

Finally, successful learning communities must develop sustainable leadership. We must create teacher leaders. When administrators listen to you, you have some ownership in the school instead of just following orders (Blankstein, 2004). According to Jim Collins (2001, in Blankstein, 2004) a Level 5 leader has intense professional will and deep humility. Fullan (2010)

states that powerful principals do not dominate. Instead they are obsessed with the instructional core of personalized learning and getting results for each and every student. They do this by modeling hope and optimism, life long learning, and caring; Seizing opportunities to communicate and stay the course. Although a principal may take the lead in arranging meetings at first, over time, community members must assume prominent roles. Supervisors must share authority and decision making from the beginning and gradually prepare other members to take the lead. Self-governance will both help a professional learning community continue and boost teachers' feelings of professionalism (Hord, S. M., & Hirsh, S. A. (2009, February).

Fullan says that, “Successful principals and the learning communities they implement develop others in a way that is integrated into the work of the school. These collaborative cultures have two powerful features: They are collectively effective at solving problems and making progress on an ongoing basis, and they generate a pipeline of leaders for the next phase. Succession is less of a problem in these school systems because they are constantly cultivating kindred spirits and future leaders who can go even further (2010).” Lively learning communities must be mindful and meaningful learning communities interested in the children who come to school each day as well as attentive to results (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009)

The day of top down authoritarian leadership is fading. Today’s students and teachers are not well served by such a model. Today’s leaders must be mentors and foster learning communities within their schools that leads in turn to sustainable leadership that rises from teachers. Dennis Shirley and Andy Hargreaves (2009) articulate a way forward and they call this The Fourth Way. It is a way of inspiration and innovation. It does not drive reform relentlessly through teachers, use them as final delivery points for government policies or vacuum up their motivation into a vortex of changed defined by short term political agendas. On the contrary it

brings together policy, professional involvement and public engagement around an inspiring vision of prosperity, opportunity and creativity. The Fourth way (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) as articulated is an invitation to change built around the formation of an authentic community of where everyone is a learner. Community calls us into such authentic relationships with each other and these connections are what invite true concern for the welfare of each other and especially our students. While all learning communities are sustained by the learners themselves it is the information about the learners that helps them to grow. Data is extremely important but it must be kept in perspective and a community informed by data is very different from a community driven by data. Data should invite conversations and those conversations should invite inquiry into the data. The truths revealed must always be revisited because change is a visible sign of a vibrant community. While data may reveal essential truths which inform a community those truths must be bound by troth for it is the community itself which bring meaning to the truth and provides a context and culture for the work.

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