

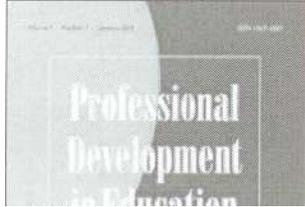
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## **The professional learning community as subversive activity: countering the culture of conventional schooling**

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As the professional learning community (PLC) as a desired cultural norm gains popularity within K-12 state schools, greater knowledge of the PLC implementation process is warranted. This study reports findings from semi-structured focus group interviews with teachers in an urban/suburban high school after one year of schoolwide professional development introducing the PLC as a schoolwide practice. Three findings emerge. First, PLC practices are countercultural to mainstream teacher practice. School leaders and external change agents introducing PLCs in mainstream schools must, therefore, approach the work not as a technical task but as cultural transformation. Second, group facilitation skill is a crucial leadership attribute for the effective cultivation of a PLC. Third, to be effective, PLC cultivation must be perceived not as an end-to-itself, but as the *means to* a clearly identified, shared, and compelling goal for student learning; otherwise, it risks being dismissed by teachers as the usual professional development noise.

Keywords: professional learning communities; professional development; school improvement; educational leadership

### **Introduction**

The objective for this study was to gain new knowledge about the experience of teachers in the early stage of professional learning community (PLC) development. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

- (1) What are the thoughts and feelings of school personnel in the early stages of a school change process intended to transform the school's adult culture into a PLC?
- (2) What implications do the identified thoughts and feelings carry for the actions of school leaders and external change agents invited by school leaders in cultivating PLCs?

### **Theoretical frame**

Research reported in the literature since the mid-1980s has led to the formulation of a new construct for effective school practitioner behavior, known variously as the 'professional learning community', 'teacher learning community', and 'community of practice' (Hord 1997, Dufour and Eaker 1998, Wenger *et al.* 2002, McLaughlin and

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Talbert 2006). Based on research findings, scholarly theory-building and practitioner literature advancing the PLC construct, it is possible to identify commonalities in PLC-related research and practice to establish a working definition of the term. The working out of the theoretical frame therefore begins by deriving a working definition of PLC based on research, an examination of the scholarly history of the construct and contemporary practitioner literature. The definition is presented as a set of traits associated with the PLC. Next, the theoretical frame identifies linkages established in the research literature between PLCs and student learning. Third, it identifies stages drawn from the research literature that the adult culture of a school passes through as it evolves into a PLC. Fourth, it identifies leadership characteristics associated with PLCs. These four outworkings of the notion of the PLC presented in the theoretical frame inform the examination of the school site reported on here in which PLC formation was deliberately attempted.

### **A working definition of the PLC**

The modern notion of the PLC issues from several cross-cutting intellectual tributaries. An early source is the work and monumental influence of John Dewey. Dewey's recurrent notion of reflection as a central modality of human intellect was an explicit source for Donald Schon's (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner as well as Argyris *et al.*'s (1985) conceptualization of action science as a practitioner stance. Related theory building, meanwhile, was occurring within the field of organizational development founded on the work of Kurt Lewin (1997 [1948, 1951]), from which the notion of organizational learning sprang. Drawing on the work of Schon, Argyris *et al.*, Lewin, and the field of organizational development, Senge (1990) advanced the idea of the learning organization within the field of management. The notion of the learning organization migrated to the field of education most directly through the research of Shirley Hord. Hord worked in what she described as 'a learning organization that matched Peter Senge's descriptions of such an organizational arrangement' (Hord 1997, p. v) and began to study schools that possessed similar characteristics, finding, in a qualitative study of an elementary school (Boyd and Hord 1994a, 1994b), that staff learning through shared inquiry, dialogue and reflection was an essential element. A literature review by Hord (1997) established the term 'professional learning community' (PLC) within the field of education. Related research conducted around the same time by Judith Warren Little (1993, 1995, 2002a, 2002b), Milbrey McLaughlin (McLaughlin and Mitra 2003), and Fred Newmann and Associates (1996) gained attention within the field of education and, together, began to form a foundation for practitioner-oriented books applying research for the emerging PLC construct to K-12 practice. A very notable practitioner-oriented book is *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (Dufour and Eaker 1998), for which a search of Google Scholar in 2010 shows an astonishing 834 citations, suggesting widespread influence (Google Scholar 2010). Many practitioner-oriented PLC books followed Dufour and Eaker, such as Boudet *et al.* (2005), City *et al.* (2009), Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008), McDonald *et al.* (2007), McLaughlin and Talbert (2006), Schmoker (2006) and Senge (2000).

Taken together, the research literature and the practitioner literature it spawned offer an agreed-upon set of characteristics constituting a PLC. These characteristics of the adult culture of a school may be summarized as follows:

Table 1. Characteristics of conventional public school adult culture and a PLC.

Characteristics of a conventional public school adult culture	Characteristics of a PLC
1. Professional staff as a mini-bureaucracy: each person does his/her assigned job	1. Professional staff as a community: shared vision for learning and shared responsibility for student growth
2. A guiding ethic of quick solutions and immediate results	2. A guiding ethic of inquiry, continuous improvement, and long term growth
3. Isolated work environment with little examination of practice	3. Collective examination of teaching practice and related data
4. Reliance on established routines	4. Reliance on dialogue, reflection and experimentation in practice
5. Little time for collaboration	5. Regular opportunities built into the work schedule for collaboration
6. Differential expectations for different students	6. A commitment to high level learning for all students
7. A primary focus on organizational features such as schedules, budgets, programs, rules, management routines and logistics	7. A primary focus on teaching and learning

- (1) The professional staff as a community: shared vision for learning and shared responsibility for student growth.
- (2) A guiding ethic of inquiry and continuous improvement.
- (3) Collective examination of teaching practice and related data.
- (4) Reliance on dialogue, reflection and experimentation in practice.
- (5) Regular opportunities built into the work schedule for collaboration.
- (6) A commitment to high level learning for all students.
- (7) A primary focus on teaching and learning.

These characteristics, drawn from the literature, represent a summary of research to date and constitute a working definition of PLC for this study. The characteristics of a PLC, as represented here, stand in stark contrast to the characteristics of a conventional public school that have been documented widely in the literature as well (Elmore 2004, Fullan 2007, Kozol 2005, McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, Nehring 2007, 2008, Powell *et al.* 1986, Sizer 2004, Tyack and Cuban 1997). Table 1 contrasts the characteristics of the conventional public school's adult culture and those of the PLC.

### Linkages between PLCs and student learning

Having established a working definition for PLC, we turn next in the development of our theoretical frame to the linkages between PLCs and student learning. A growing body of research dating to the mid-1990s is establishing an ever stronger link between PLCs and increased student learning. The findings of several large-scale studies are summarized here. Lee and Smith's (1996) study, based on an analysis of the US National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, with a sample size of over 11,000 students and 9904 teachers in 820 schools, found consistently that, in schools where teachers assumed collective responsibility for student learning, achievement gains were significantly higher. A 2001 study by Yasumoto, Eukawa, and Bidwell based on a national US sample of 52 high schools and 3000 students found that student achievement increased when depaitsuential faculties exhibited strong instructional practice norms, consistency of practice and high 'communication density' (Yasumoto *et al.*

2001). Newmann and Associates (1996) reported findings from a five-year study of 24 schools across the United States. The authors found that high-performing schools shared several characteristics, among them: teacher teams organized for collaboration, a school day structured to accommodate common planning time, elimination of tracking to ensure universal student access to high-quality curriculum and instruction, and shared responsibility for student growth. Louis and Marks (1998) found in a national sample of 24 schools that schools with professional communities had a positive relationship with student performance. Several studies authored by Milbrey McLaughlin and colleagues (Center for Research on the Context of Teaching 2002, McLaughlin and Mitra 2003) based on the San Francisco Bay Area School Reform Collaborative between 1996 and 2001 show findings similar to those above. For an excellent summary of research into the elements of PLCs pre-dating the above, see Hord's (1997) literature review, *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. What these studies and others consistently demonstrate is a positive link between the PLC traits identified in Table I and improved student learning. Although the research literature is still thin due to the relatively recent emergence of the PLC construct, findings to date suggest that cultivation of the PLC is a promising direction for school improvement.

### **Stages in the evolution of a PLC**

We turn next in the development of our theoretical frame to identified stages in the evolution of a PLC, focusing chiefly on work by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006). Based on cross-case analysis of five years' worth of data from 10 schools in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, McLaughlin and Talbert identified three stages through which PLCs moved as they matured: novice, intermediate and advanced. At the novice stage, the beginning of a PLC initiative, teachers often felt 'overwhelmed and frustrated with all of the new tasks and demands associated with inquiry' (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, p. 31). They struggled to identify appropriate data to examine and to determine what counts as evidence of progress. At this stage, PLCs were beginning to 'develop a repertoire of research skills, including constructing research questions, problem statements, and strategies for analysis' (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, p. 31). At the intermediate stage, teachers began to use a cycle of inquiry to improve practice and identified small improvements. At the same time: 'intermediate-stage schools did not connect inquiry with practice easily. Instead, they struggled to shift the culture in their school toward reflection, evidence-based decision-making, and collaboration' (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, p. 32). PLCs at the intermediate stage were also engaged in a process of developing shared goals and a shared vision. Some teachers actively resisted the initiative as it began to gain a foothold. McLaughlin and Talbert cite a teacher who commented, 'I feel like saying, "Leave me alone. I don't want to deal with the reflection. I have work to do"' (2006, p. 32). At this stage teachers began to acquire procedural knowledge but largely did not yet possess deep understanding or an inquiry stance. Schools at the advanced stage functioned as PLCs. 'Teachers had incorporated into their work the process of developing questions, collecting and analyzing data, and taking action based on that analysis' (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006, p. 34). Questions probed deeply into instructional practice and teachers possessed a sense of shared responsibility for student growth.

### Leadership characteristics associated with PLCs

The final step in the outworking of our theoretical frame is an examination of the leadership characteristics associated with the PLC. Recent research has identified leadership characteristics associated with school improvement in general, and leadership with PLCs in particular. Because the field is increasingly embracing the PLC construct as a school improvement strategy, there is, increasingly, a merging of findings about effective school leadership and effective PLC leadership. Accordingly, this section looks to two recent scholarly reviews of school leadership in general as well as a prominent synthesis of research on PLC leadership specifically.

The first of two recent scholarly reviews of school leadership (Leithwood *et al.* 2004) summarizes findings from an exhaustive review of relevant empirical research with three succinct and relatively straightforward findings. The three findings identify three sets of actions taken by leaders that result in improvement. They are as follows:

- (1) By setting directions - charting a clear course that everyone understands, establishing high expectations and using data to track progress and performance.
- (2) By developing people -- providing teachers and others in the system with the necessary support and training to succeed.
- (3) And by making the organization work - ensuring that the entire range of conditions and incentives in districts and schools fully supports rather than inhibits teaching and learning. (Leithwood *et al.* 2004, pp. 8-9)

The second scholarly review, a meta-analysis (Waters *et al.* 2003), reviewed literature on school leadership from the previous 30 years. Combing 5000 studies, the authors identified 70 that met their selection criteria. The analysis identified 21 'leadership responsibilities' associated with student achievement. The top five as measured by effect size are as follows:

- (1) situational awareness: is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems.
- (2) Intellectual stimulation: ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture.
- (3) change agent: is willing to and actively challenges the status quo.
- (4) input: involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies.
- (5) Culture: fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation. (Waters *et al.* 2003, p. 4)

Leadership traits that are more specific to PLC development are summarized well by Dufour and Eaker (1998), based on a review of empirical research and practical experience, rendered in terms friendly to practitioners. The first five of their 'Top Ten' list of leadership guidelines, paraphrased, are as follows:

- (1) Focus on shared mission, vision, values, and goals.
- (2) Communicate the importance of mission, vision, values and goals on a daily basis.
- (3) Build the school around collaborative teams that engage in a constant cycle of reflection, planning, experimentation, analysis of results and adaptation.

- (4) Build a PLC culture by helping the faculty articulate the shared values, ask questions that prompt reflective dialogue, tell stories that illustrate the culture of a PLC, draw on celebration, ceremony and ritual to emphasize shared values.
- (5) Foster an approach to curriculum that focuses on learning rather than teaching (Dufour and Eaker 1998, pp. 196-197).

If we compare the leadership characteristics from these three studies with the characteristics of the PLC identified in Table 1, we see a high degree of alignment. What stands out, particularly, is that the effective PLC leader both regularly *exhibits* PLC traits and *actively fosters* their development among the faculty.

This completes the outworking of our theoretical frame. Clearly, much is known about PLCs; in particular, their traits, their linkage to student learning, the developmental stages of PLCs and leadership traits associated with PLCs. Less is known, however, about the cultivation of PLCs. How does one begin the process of faculty transformation into a PLC? How does one nurture PLC growth through identified developmental stages? What roles do teachers and school leaders play in sustaining PLC development?

Because PLCs rely on shared vision, trust, and collaboration, PLC success depends largely on the meaning that individual teachers attach to the work. Subjective meaning has been identified as a key factor in the success and failure of deliberate change initiatives in schools and other organizational settings (Marris 1986, Evans 1996, Fullan 2007, Nehring 2009). Identification of the thoughts and feelings of school personnel as they are introduced to PLCs will reveal subjective meaning and thus provide valuable insight for those who wish to cultivate successful PLCs. This study sought to document the thoughts and feelings of personnel who had recently been introduced to PLCs in their school.

### Setting

From spring 2008 to spring 2009, the administrative team of an urban/suburban public high school in the northeastern United States (which we will call Amesley High School) engaged in a process to establish faculty 'study groups' (a local term) for the purpose of building a professional community of learners. The goals of the study group initiative align partially with the characteristics of PLCs as defined in the theoretical frame for this study. School-level administrators explained the goals of the study groups to the school's faculty in May 2008 with the following statement:

Goals:

- Create a *true* community of professional learners
- Focus on student learning as opposed to teaching
- Internal accountability (students *and* teachers responsible for student achievement)
- More extensive and effective use of formative assessment to improve achievement

- Help to bring about a school climate conducive to cutting edge teaching and learning - formal collaboration between professionals
- Increase use of assessments to insure mastery.

In September 2008, the faculty received another statement of the goals, prepared by the external consultant in cooperation with the school administrators:

Amesley Study Groups, 2008-2009

The General Goal: Improvement of instructional Practice and Student Learning.

The General Means: Colleagues teaching and learning from each other through well structured sessions that emphasize careful listening, careful talk, deep understanding, and an appreciation for the complexity of our shared craft. Assumption: The most powerful resource for professional learning is the professionals on site!

The Specific Goal: To identify as a whole faculty and as individuals several specific goals to work on in the coming weeks and months. The goals should be drawn from ongoing systemwide and/or schoolwide initiatives identified by the principal (District Goals, School Improvement Plan, State Frameworks, Accreditation Report Recommendations). The goals should focus on individual instructional practice and student learning.

The Specific Means: The first several sessions will help us to become practiced in working with colleagues across disciplines to enhance instructional practice and student learning. For example, on Friday, we will do an exercise involving the examination of student work. The next several sessions will be devoted to identifying a limited number of goals to work on and doing work to achieve the goals. The final sessions of the year will be devoted to reflecting on the work we have done and documenting ways in which each of us has advanced our own practice.

What This Work Is Not:

- (1) This work is not primarily about designing curriculum or addressing structural concerns, such as classroom use, school schedule, etc. Those are important issues, but they are not the primary focus of this work. This work is about each of us reflecting on and continually improving our practice as educators.
- (2) The work is not primarily about a report or a 'product'. It is about the improvement of teaching and learning. Documentation is, nonetheless valuable. Therefore, as goals are identified, individuals and groups may also identify reasonable evidence to monitor their own progress and inform work going forward.

Taken together, the stated administrative goals and the stated external consultant goals align well with the working definition of PLC identified in the 'Theoretical frame' section. The degree to which administrative and consultant goals aligned with administrator and consultant practice, however, is a focus of the discussion section.

One year into the work, each member of the high school faculty, including para-professionals, teachers and administrators, was a member of an inter-departmental study group that met periodically to examine instructional practice and student work. The one-year anniversary of the PLC initiative afforded an appropriate moment to ask school personnel about their experience. The introduction of PLC work was recent enough that personnel would be likely to remember their early thoughts and feelings, but the work was developed to the extent that personnel would be able to describe ways in which their thoughts and feelings had evolved. Because teachers represented

the largest sub-group of school personnel, and because their participation was more crucial than that of the paraprofessionals and less assured than the administrators, this study focused exclusively on teachers.

The genesis of the study group initiative was a school district building plan. In 2007, anticipating the construction of a new high school, district and school leaders seized the opportunity to create more than a new building. They asked how they might couple an improvement in physical space with an improvement in instructional practice and student learning. The district offered to send several high school faculty to a summer institute at a distinguished university. Two high school administrators attended the institute in 2007. Upon their return, they invited one of the institute faculty members, who is the lead author of this study, to serve as consultant for their local initiative. The following spring, a dozen more high school faculty - nine teachers and three administrators - volunteered to attend the 2008 Summer Institute at the same university. They were also recruited to serve as peer facilitators for the coming school year. During the spring and summer, the consultant coached the 12 volunteers in peer leadership skills. For the *2008/09* school year, the high school faculty was assembled into 11 study groups (one facilitator left the district) with the goal of collaboratively examining instructional practice in order to improve student learning. Study groups were led by the faculty facilitators and mixed by gender, teaching experience, department and role (teacher, counselor, paraprofessional, administrator, etc.). Using several early-release days spread across the school year, facilitators introduced their study groups to principles and practices of a PLC through protocols and exercises focused on the examination of instruction and student work. Toward the end of the school year, each faculty member composed a problem statement, focusing on a problem of practice, similar to those developed by Summer Institute participants (see Appendix 1), and many faculty members presented their problem statements within their study groups, using the consultancy protocol (see Appendix 2). Study groups met on an irregular basis throughout the school year with a total of five meetings between the start of school in September and early November, including one full-day session. Study groups did not meet again until March due to the snow day cancellation of a January meeting. There was one more meeting in April. In total, faculty spent 18 hours in study group work, with a four-month gap between November and March.

### **Methods and data sources**

During May and June *2009*, researchers assembled three focus groups of three to four teachers each and, employing a semi-structured protocol, asked them questions about their thoughts and feelings regarding the introduction of PLC work. A general invitation to participate was issued to all teachers during a regular faculty meeting. A total of 11 teachers took part and each was given a \$50 bookstore gift card upon completion of the interview as compensation for their participation. The focus group conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted by a researcher not personally acquainted with the interviewees in order to reduce bias. Appropriate IRB approvals were obtained from both the university and the school district, stipulating anonymity. Data were coded inductively for themes emerging from the body of data using constant comparison (Maykut and Morehouse *1994*). This phase of coding was conducted separately and independently by two researchers who then compared

resulting themes and created a consolidated list of themes. Deductive coding was then begun using the list of themes. In the course of this phase of coding, the list was found to be inadequate as much of the data was left uncoded. A revised list of inductive themes was developed and approved by both researchers. Deductive analysis proceeded with data coded to the revised list of inductive themes. The two researchers then analyzed the results in light of the research questions and theoretical frame for findings and recommendations.

## Results

The inductive search yielded a variety of themes for each of the interview questions. The themes appear in Table 2 in Appendix 3. Examination of responses coded to the deductive themes revealed several overarching themes. The overarching themes are listed below in italics. Each theme is followed by one or more representative quotes from participants. The location of the quote in the data analysis is identified in parentheses by the interview question number and deductive theme with which it is associated. Interview questions and deductive themes appear in Table 2 in Appendix 3.

- (1) Theme: *Participants expressed discomfort with the absence of a concrete product:*

Representative quotes:

In education, we are still like product, product, product, and then all of a sudden we came to a meeting and it was like, touchy feely. What's this about? (5. Wasn't clear)

In education, we are always having a product. Grades, what we are doing, how we are teaching. Everything we do is product driven. The students are products in what they are learning. My question is, why are we spending all this time, money and effort and we don't have anything to show for it? (4. Concerned that there was no product)

- (2) Theme: *Participants expressed confusion about the purpose of activities:*

Representative quotes:

I think it was really unfocused. As you said, our leaders didn't say, this is the outcome we want. They weren't really sure and it was really unclear. (5. I still didn't understand)

At those first few meetings, you were completely clueless as to what was going on. (5. I still didn't understand)

I just had a sense that there was no real clarity really on any front in terms of what the goal was. Even finding out what the goal is, and I know this is probably a side note, but it is still kind of unclear to me. I knew what was expected of us at each meeting. I knew that there was an agenda and we were going to be doing X and Y, but I didn't understand the vision associated with that. (5. Wasn't clear)

- (3) Theme: *Participants expressed reticence toward key practices, such as protocols, examination of student work and exercises to build relational understanding, widely in use in high performing schools:*

Representative quotes:

Talking about the issues, talking about problems in a group just doesn't appeal to me. I tend to be someone who would rather have it fixed and then let's move on. The whole process for me is very frustrating. (6. Too theoretical)

Some of the things that we did, the pair-share type of stuff, I don't need to be doing that. Three minutes here and three minutes there and two minutes here and one minute here and five minutes there. The protocol, no. (9c. Protocol too constraining)

I am thinking, really is it that hard to come up with a problem statement? This is the question so we are good. Why do we need two sessions to do that? (5. Too much time developing problem)

In the beginning, I can remember we did an activity where we looked at another person's rubric for an activity and how we would grade it vs. how they would grade it. I just did not understand. That was like one whole session and I did not get it. (5. Wasn't clear)

- (4) Theme: *When asked directly what they saw as the purpose of the work, participants overwhelmingly provided correct answers in numerous categories, such as: Get people ready for high school changes; Get us to understand and work differently with each other; Teach us how to work with each other; Solve problems in our classroom; Break down teacher isolation; Build learning communities to improve teaching and learning.*

Representative quotes:

I guess really was [*sic*] to think about your teaching and to share those experiences and maybe to make you feel part of the larger community in the school. I think it is true of all schools. The teachers really do not ever see, or *very* rarely do they see, how your coworkers work. You work next to somebody for however many years you are in a building and it's not like you are actually in their room. One kid will walk in and say, 'Oh, that guy was awesome.' Another kid says, 'That guy sucked.' It's all in the kid's perspective. It can be very lonely in that regard so it's nice to make those connections. To me, that's a bigger purpose from what I got out of it this year. (8. Break down)

I think they are trying to develop learning communities within the school that help to foster the best practices. (8. Build learning communities)

Yeah, I think the similar thing that this is to foster us looking at our craft and being with people who have a similar interest, a similar issue that they feel passionate about, learning about it, studying about it and hopefully making a change. (8. Solving problems)

- (5) Theme: *Participant attitudes toward the initiative evolved in a general pattern over the course of the year from a mixture of tentative emotions to a mixture of committed emotions. Attitudes at the beginning of the year were a mixture of skepticism, uncertainty, and interest. Attitudes at the end of the year were a mixture of opposition, ambivalence and support.*

With this theme, we depart from our listing of relevant quotes due to the complex nature of the theme. Analyzing the inductive themes chronologically, a distinct pattern emerged in the evolution of teacher thoughts and feelings from the introduction of the initiative in June 2008 to the end of the first school year of implementation (May/June

2009). As the initiative moved through three periods - introduction of initiative, June, 2008; part way through school year, 2008/09; and end of school year, 2008/09 - teacher thoughts and feelings evolved from a somewhat tentative mixture of skepticism, uncertainty and interest to a more committed mixture of opposition, ambivalence and support. It is important to note that while some individuals consistently showed resistance or support, others showed some of each, suggesting deep ambivalence. Figure 1 presents the inductive themes arranged chronologically in order to show the evolution of teacher thoughts and feelings.

Resistance	Ambivalence	Support
<b>END OF SCHOOL YEAR, 2008-2009</b>		
Nothing has changed	Needs to be done in a week not a year	There is a potential it will change in practice
It's just arm fuzzies	I miss old PDP days when you could choose	Looking forward to next year
There are ever more important schoolwide issues that need addressing	Wonder if teachers and administrators together will work	I like the problem statement work
Too many initiatives		
Too theoretical		
<b>PART WAY THROUGH SCHOOL YEAR, 2008-009</b>		
We should be focusing on issues instead	Still didn't understand it; confused	I was excited
Grouping teachers with administrators	Opened my eyes to things going on in school	
Too much time developing problem statement	Felt different	Looked forward to reflection
Lack of continuity between sessions	Chance but not	talk good I get it now
<b>INTRODUCTION OF INITIATIVE, JUNE, 2008</b>		
Concerned we'd do it just one year	Didn't get it	Anything that gets me thinking about teaching is good
Facilitators didn't get it	It was a blur	Good to meet people in different departments
	Mixed feelings	Liked it; was open to it

Skepticism    Uncertainty    Interest

Figure 1. Evolution of teacher thoughts and feelings.

## Findings

The high level of clarity demonstrated by participants about the purpose of the initiative stands in striking contrast to the patterns of confusion, reticence and/or ambivalence toward activities undertaken to advance the initiative. What can explain this perplexing outcome? Several likely possibilities, constituting findings for this study, are suggested by the data.

*Finding 1. Messages issuing from the school and district leadership as to the purpose of the initiative appeared to shift over time or were not sufficiently clear*

One participant commented:

It started out last spring as a restructuring and everyone thought it was a physical restructuring because this was in conjunction with we have been approved [*sic*] to renovate the school. Then it came about that it was not physically restructuring. It was restructuring how you approach teaching and thinking about education.

Another participant commented: 'I had thought that [what] we were getting to meet on it had to do with discipline issues, management issues and running the school issues.' Although the goals of the initiative beginning in May 2008 appeared to be clearer and consistent with the statements to the faculty identified in the 'Theoretical frame' section, participant comments suggest that the statements to the faculty beginning in May were different from earlier statements. The shifting message from school leaders could create confusion and foster disinterest or discontent with the initiative. All three reviews of leadership literature cited in the 'Theoretical frame' section emphasize the importance of a clear vision and goals communicated regularly and consistently by the school leadership. It would appear that in this instance vision and goals shifted over time and the communication of goals was inconsistent.

*Finding 2. The initiative lost continuity due to a long gap in study group sessions between November and March*

Several participants commented on this. 'And by chopping it up that much, it's sort of makes it like school. We are going to teach you addition now. Three months from now, we are going to teach you subtraction and we forget the addition' (9c. All of this). Linking this finding with the theoretical frame, the importance of regular opportunities to work collaboratively with peers, identified in the literature as a feature to be managed by the school administrator, was compromised by the gap. The loss of momentum and continuity apparent in these teacher comments was the unfortunate outcome.

*Finding 3. Some peer facilitators were not quite ready to lead study groups*

Participant experiences appeared to vary greatly depending in part on how they perceived the competence of their facilitator. One participant's comment suggests a facilitator who was not filling the role well: 'Even the person in charge didn't seem to

know what they were doing so that was very frustrating' (2. Facilitators). A different participant expressed a favorable view of her facilitator:

I liked our facilitator. She respected us, I think. She was very good about saying, okay we are going to be doing this. She heard our concerns like we are a little lost. She addressed it as much as she could at that time. I felt that she treated us very professionally throughout the whole time. I think that was kind of nice. I think we lucked out and we did our job. (9c. Facilitator)

While the literature reviewed for the theoretical frame does not identify facilitative skill as a leadership attribute associated with a high-performing PLC, it is apparent in this study that the lack of facilitative skill by some of the teacher leaders had a negative impact on the outcome of the initiative. The training provided by the consultant was insufficient to close the gap.

***Finding 4. The initiative lacked short-term benchmarks of progress***

One participant commented:

When you first introduce something, you also want to say why is this going to be important? How are we going to use it? Today we are going to do step one and then tomorrow we will do step two. I will say, 'Remember step one?' This is how it bridges to step two and this is how the next time it will bridge to step three and all together we are going to end up with this lovely thing. I would have explained all of the steps and how they would work together and what we hope to get at the end. I would just delineate it.

Although it was made clear throughout the first year of this initiative that the overarching goal was the improvement of teaching and learning, there was little attention to short-term indicators that could have fostered a feeling of growing momentum and progress in concrete terms. McLaughlin and Talbert's stages of PLC evolution suggest that successful progress through stage two is built upon evidence of small improvements and successes linked to PLC work. The failure by school leaders and the consultant to attend sufficiently to such indicators may have tended to hold back the initiative's progress overall.

These reasons are helpful in understanding some of the dissonance in participant experiences, and they suggest steps that school/district leaders and external change agents can take to increase the degree of success with similar initiatives. Such steps should include the following:

- (1) Consistent message from school/district leaders, external agents, and peer facilitators as to purpose and process.
- (2) Regularly scheduled sessions through the school year that explicitly acknowledge and build on previous accomplishments and/or unresolved issues from session to session.
- (3) Stricter vetting of facilitators' readiness to lead a study group.
- (4) Inclusion of visible, short term benchmarks of progress.

Such steps are consistent with the findings of studies cited in the theoretical frame regarding school leadership in general, and school leadership of PLCs more

specifically. Clarity and continuity of goals and benchmarks of improvement are significant factors referenced in all three of the literature reviews cited. Facilitative leadership skill is not mentioned prominently in the leadership literature cited. This study suggests it should be given greater attention. It should also be noted that this study did not focus specifically on leadership attributes but instead on teacher thoughts and feelings. It is therefore not known what leadership behaviors were predominant in school life outside the PLC work. It is clear, however, that within the confines of the PLC work, as perceived by teachers, leadership behaviors by the school administrators, the external change agent and the study group facilitators only partially met the needs of the PLCs.

### Discussion

Procedural improvements by the PLC leaders, such as those listed in the previous section, would probably enhance teacher support and overall progress. At the same time, procedural reasons alone seem insufficient to explain such a striking contrast between understanding of purpose and confusion/reticence toward the related activities. Likewise, procedural changes alone seem unlikely to substantially increase teacher engagement and overall progress. A deeper analysis of the data in light of existing research suggests a more troubling barrier.

Research in recent decades of the culture of mainstream public schools has revealed overarching patterns that distinguish mainstream school culture from the culture of a PLC. The comparison of conventional school culture and the culture of the PLC in Table 1 shows that conventional schools are dominated by procedural thinking at all levels, short-term goals, isolated teacher practice and the absence of shared vision or shared responsibility. PLCs, in contrast, focus relentlessly on teaching and learning through efforts infused with inquiry, critical thinking, long-term aspirations, and shared vision and responsibility.

The conflicting patterns in participant experience for the current study (broad understanding of purpose, confusion and reticence with process) begin to make sense when viewed in light of these findings. Ideas such as collaboration, problem-solving, breaking down teacher isolation, building learning communities, and improving teaching and learning are unassailable verities akin to truth, goodness and beauty. But, like truth, goodness and beauty, they are unassailable only so long as they stand on a remote pedestal. Once an organization begins to examine them and relate them to ongoing work, they quickly problematize existing beliefs and practices. Indeed, the beliefs and practices associated with the unassailable verities are quite foreign to mainstream schools. They are beyond foreign. They are counter-cultural. Adaptive teaching runs *counter* to procedural teaching. Shared practice runs *counter* to isolated, private practice. Long-term growth runs *counter* to quick solutions. And so on. Singly and collectively, the traits of a PLC summarized above threaten to de-stabilize an existing culture of conventional traits. No wonder then that serious work on the relational aspects of collaboration was dismissed as 'warm fuzzies' and that protocols widely in use in high-performing PLCs were resisted as artificially constraining, or that focused attention on problems of practice was regarded as a distraction from other more important schoolwide issues or that the adaptive thinking required as a study group norm was misunderstood as product-less wheel spinning.

It appears, then, that the chief barrier to cultivation of a PLC in a mainstream school, in this instance, was the counter-cultural nature of the central beliefs and practices. Given this explanation, how should a teacher facilitator, principal, superintendent or external agent proceed?

It is possible that this conundrum may be untangled somewhat or entirely by ensuring that school leaders, whether administrators or teacher leaders, are skillful facilitators. While facilitation skill did not surface in the literature reviewed for this study as a key leadership trait, its uneven presence in the initiative studied here was clearly an impediment. Furthermore, it would appear that providing a short sequence of a half-dozen training sessions, as was provided by the consultant in this study, is, at least in some cases, insufficient to prepare effective facilitators. Both educational leaders and institutions that prepare educators and educational leaders should consider featuring facilitation skills prominently in educator preparation programs and ongoing professional learning initiatives.

It is also possible that the PLC initiative studied here suffered from too little focus on student learning. It is important to remember that the PLC is a means to an end. The PLC describes an adult culture that supports student learning. Adult culture is the means; student learning is the end. Reminding ourselves that the goal of all this angsty activity by the adults is to improve student learning may shed some light. At no time in connection with this initiative did any of the leaders (including the external agent) present the faculty with compelling data showing schoolwide gaps in student learning or any other sort of failure to meet an important goal. Consequently, there was little urgency for the faculty to engage in any activity outside of their customary rounds. The PLC work could be easily dismissed as the usual professional development noise interfering with the daily work of teachers in classrooms. Alternatively, the PLC work could be understood as a professional development *option* that might appeal to some teachers and not others. After all, there was no compelling reason given by the leaders to suggest that this work must be embraced by *all* as the chosen means to address serious problems with student achievement.

As long as PLC work is perceived by teachers as a professional development *option* that they may choose to embrace or ignore, then systemwide change is unlikely to occur. Because change stirs up uncertainty, ambiguity and fear of potential incompetence, there is a powerful drift within organizations toward the *status quo* (Marris 1986, Evans 1996, Fullan 2007, Nehring *et al.* 2009). If, however, change agents can create conditions in which the risks associated with the *status quo* are actually greater than the risks associated with change, then they will increase the chances of producing systemic change. Thus, intentional cultivation of urgency may be an important driver of change in beliefs and practices. Under such conditions, the introduction of practices associated with PLCs may be seen as a welcome support for the required changes - a path to new competence - as opposed to just another school reform idea. For example, a school leader might facilitate an analysis of student learning results with teachers, demonstrating that significant sub-groups of the student population are achieving at a far lower rate than others. If the school possesses a documented, institutional commitment to equity, the achievement gap can be seen as a clear and compelling problem, central to the school's purpose, and one that must be solved. Having thus established an urgent cause, the leader may then offer assistance to the staff in addressing the problem in the form of an initiative to cultivate collaborative reflective practice with the goal of transforming the school into a PLC. In the setting for the current study,

while there was a reasonable amount of professional learning opportunity, there was little or no collective urgency felt by the teaching staff. Change was entirely optional. No wonder many teachers felt comfortable dismissing it.

To put this dynamic in more familiar terms, one might say there was sufficient *support* but little *press*. While educators widely admit that a good teacher provides his or her students with both press and support, we have yet to embrace this simple and powerful notion in our efforts to transform schools. Invoking the familiar formula for learning success 'press and support', it would appear that the intervention featured in this study provided substantial although flawed support while providing little to no press. Without press, there was no urgency, without urgency the risk associated with change remained greater than the risk associated with the *status quo* and change, both actual and potential, remained suppressed. Future interventions of this kind will do well to bring the twin levers of press and support to bear on the hard work of school transformation.

Despite the missing ingredient of urgency, the current study suggests that persistence with the PLC-building process in the face of confusion and reticence *may* also be an important component of successful PLC cultivation. There are at least two reasons to believe this is true: the data from this study suggest that, for some teachers, beliefs and practices were gradually shifting during the first year of this initiative; and reflective dialogue, central to the purpose and process of this initiative and others like it that aspire to create a PLC, has been demonstrated to create new knowledge and promote double loop learning, the kind of learning needed if a culture is to change (Isaacs 1999, Nehring *et al.* 2010).

PLC and PLC-like initiatives rooted in reflective practice have spawned multiple approaches for practical application in schools. It may be that the approach taken in this school-level initiative was only partially matched to the context, and that by means as yet unknown there may be ways to identify the right approach for a given setting. During the past two decades, various approaches and related tools have been developed within the burgeoning PLC field. A short list includes critical friends groups (see National School Reform Faculty 2010), instructional rounds (City *et al.* 2009), lesson study (Stepanek *et al.* 2007), collaborative action research (Gordon 2008) and PLCs (Dufour and Eaker 1998).

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**Appendix 1.**

**Sample Problem Statement #1, Social Studies Teacher**

I am a social studies teacher, and I teach 0<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History. Students in my department are tracked based on prior academic performance, and I teach all three of my department's 9th grade tracks. The curriculum is based on the Massachusetts Frameworks, and, as a department, we have developed a plan for the year that identifies when each major topic in U.S. history is taught (e.g. revolutionary war, early national era, civil war, industrial revolution, etc.) in order to ensure that each topic receives appropriate attention for the time allotted. To address all of the topics in the curriculum, I find myself frequently rushing through material and providing students with no more than a superficial presentation of events. For example, the series of lessons I recently taught on the civil war lasted just two days and was mostly lectures and textbook readings. Students were understandably bored and results on homework and tests suggest they did not retain much of what was presented. Once in a while, I slow down in order to provide a deeper, inquiry-driven and project-driven approach, but I usually end up paying for it later because I fall behind schedule. For example, I developed a Constitutional Convention for which students played the roles of historical figures, developed arguments about constitutional issues, and made oral presentations. The grades they earned on the oral presentations, a test, and several written assignments suggest that not only did they retain a good deal of information, but they engaged in analysis and evaluation of important issues in American history. This is a problem for all three academic tracks.

I need to respect the department's curriculum calendar and the state frameworks, but I also want my students to be engaged and challenged to think critically. How do I find a better balance between the two than what I am currently experiencing?

**School/District Goal or Priority:**

MA Curriculum Standards, Grades 9-12; and Amesley High School Mission and Expectations: 'utilize critical thinking skills across all disciplines'.

**Appendix 2.**

*Consultancy Protocol*

**Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove, Paula Evans and Faith Dunne  
National School Reform Faculty Project (NSRF)**

Adapted by Jim Nehring 1.16.09

**Purpose:** A Consultancy is a structured process for helping an individual or a team think more expansively about a particular, concrete problem.

**Time:** Approximately 23 minutes

**Roles:** Presenter (whose work is being discussed by the group)  
Facilitator (who may participate, depending on the size of the group)  
Time Keeper (who announces beginning and ending of each step)

**Steps:**

1. The presenter shares the problem statement out loud either by reading it, or giving an extemporaneous presentation or a combination of the two. The presenter concludes with the framing question. (3 minutes)
2. The Consultancy group asks clarifying questions of the presenter - that is, questions that have brief, factual answers. (3 minutes)
3. The group asks probing questions of the presenter. These questions should be worded so that they help the presenter clarify and expand his/her thinking about the problem presented to the Consultancy group. The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about the question s/he framed or to do some analysis of the problem presented. The presenter may respond to the group's questions, but there is no discussion by the Consultancy group of the presenter's responses. Group members should refrain from offering advice or suggestions or asking questions that are actually advice or suggestions. At the end of the ten minutes, the facilitator asks the presenter to re-state his/her question for the group. (5 minutes)
4. The group talks with each other about the problem presented. (8 minutes)

Possible questions to frame the discussion:

- What did we hear?
- What didn't we hear that we think might be relevant?
- What assumptions seem to be operating?
- What questions does the problem raise for us?
- What do we think about the problem?
- What might we do or try if faced with a similar problem? What have we done in similar situations?

Members of the group sometimes suggest actions the presenter might consider taking. Most often, however, they work to define the issues more thoroughly and objectively. The presenter doesn't speak during this discussion, but instead listens and takes notes.

5. The presenter joins the conversation already in progress. (3 minutes)
6. The presenter reflects on what s/he heard and on what s/he is now thinking, sharing with the group anything that particularly resonated for him or her during any part of the Consultancy. During the presenter's reflection, there is no discussion. The group is silent. When the presenter is done, the session is over. Members should acknowledge one another's contributions and thank one another for their participation. The group should refrain from re-starting the conversation at this point. (1 minute)

**Appendix 3. Results of inductive analysis**

Table 2. Focus group questions with major themes emerging from participant responses.

Focus Group Question	Major themes emerging from participant responses
1. When did you first hear about the initiative?	Two summers ago, Last spring, August, September, October
2. What did you hear about it when you first heard about it?	Blur, Nuts and bolts, I didn't get it, facilitators didn't get it, it is going to be our whole focus (dept and faculty meetings). At first restructuring, physical plant issues Improve teaching through critical reflection and collaboration School management issues, student discipline issues
3. What was your initial reaction?	Mixed Good to meet people in different departments and discuss things Anything that gets me thinking about my teaching is good Liked it right away Upset that others were negative about it Missed having a clear product Admin and teachers together was outside comfort zone
4. What hopes and concerns did you have initially?	I hope I get along with my group I hope my group likes me I hope I fit in to my group Concerned we'd do it just one year then do something else new next year Concerned that others were having negative experience (though I had positive experience) Concerned there was no product
5. As the initiative got underway, what were some of your thoughts and feelings?	Opened my eyes to things going on in the school I was excited Looked forward to reflection I get it now I still didn't understand it/confused Lack of continuity between sessions/snow day Grouping teachers and administrators felt very different My group went well. I heard others had bad experience Wasn't clear Chance to talk good, but not focused I disagreed with people in my group We should be focusing on schoolwide issues instead Too much time developing problem statement It seemed elitist, '[name of distinguished university]' Upset that some colleagues negative

Table 2. (Continued).

Focus Group Question	Major themes emerging from participant responses
6. What are your thoughts and feelings about the initiative now, at the end of the year?	<p>I had a very good group</p> <p>Recent news about lay offs makes people question why this continues</p> <p>Looking forward to next year</p> <p>I miss old PDP days when you could choose</p> <p>Too many initiatives</p> <p>Wondering if teachers and admin together will work</p> <p>Lack of clarity still a problem</p> <p>It's just 'warm fuzzies'</p> <p>There are other more important schoolwide issues that need addressing</p> <p>I like the problem statement work</p> <p>Will be good if we continue next year in problem-based groups</p> <p>I'm afraid of being put in a group with whom I have nothing in common</p> <p>Maybe the 'warm fuzzies' are necessary to build trust for collaboration</p> <p>Too theoretical</p>
7. How have your thoughts and feelings about the initiative evolved over time?	<p>At first, liked it, then got confused, then problem statement work got me excited</p>
8. What do you see as the overall purpose of this work?	<p>Get people ready for high school changes</p> <p>Get us to understand and work differently with each other</p> <p>Teach us how to work with each other</p> <p>Solve problems in our classroom</p> <p>Break down teacher isolation</p> <p>Build learning communities to improve teaching and learning</p>
9. If you were in charge of this program, what would you do the same or different in introducing it?	<p>Keep it simple with clear results</p> <p>I like the heterogeneous groups</p> <p>Be clearer</p> <p>Discovery process that is being used helps us feel more invested</p> <p>Good that facilitators are teachers from our school</p> <p>I'd put people in groups based on common interests</p> <p>Examine and improve teaching practice with colleagues</p> <p>University consultant not involved enough</p>
10. Has work in your study group altered or affirmed your instructional practice in any way? Has it changed your practice? Improved it?	<p>I changed a few things</p> <p>More aware of my problem statement, working on it</p> <p>Changed a rubric</p> <p>Nothing has changed</p> <p>There is a potential it will change my practice</p> <p>Needs to be done in a week, not a year; continuity lost</p>
11. Has the work in your study group influenced learning of your students and, if so, how has it?	<p>No</p> <p>Not yet; looking forward to next year</p>

Table 2. (Continued).

Focus Group Question	Major themes emerging from participant responses
12. Anything else?	<p>Can we sustain the excitement for another year? (not sarcastic)</p> <p>All of this work could be done in less time</p> <p>An administrator violated trust in one group</p> <p>I had a great facilitator</p> <p>I would find it hard to be facilitator (peer and leader at same time)</p> <p>If administrators had been excluded people would have been angry</p> <p>Trust issue: told groups were random but it didn't appear to be true</p> <p>Protocol too constraining</p> <p>Facilitator was good</p> <p>Facilitator said higher ups ignored our concerns</p> <p>Concerns that faculty raised about the initiative were not addressed</p> <p>Appeared to be planned on the fly</p> <p>Not clear about university, research connections</p> <p>It's a problem that we are allowed to focus on what's under our control only</p> <p>Facilitators work too hard</p>



















