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## FOCUSING ON TEACHERS AS LEARNERS IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Practising teachers are part of professional learning communities in many educational settings. In this piece, the editors unpack what we mean by the term *learning community* and outline the nature of *professional learning* that can occur in professional learning communities. Like all good ideas, the concepts of *communities of practice* and *communities of learners* get captured, digested, and become formulas or recipes that have lost the full flavour of the original concepts. Therefore, it is crucial that we re-question the aims of professional learning communities and critically examine their current configurations. Are our professional learning communities safe places, where members can challenge current thinking, take risks and learn together with a shared purpose, and refresh ourselves? Or are the participants compelled to attend, working off someone else's agenda and direction and lacking the freedom to explore?

The word *community* is often used in discussions about the operations of schools, classes, teachers and students. Williams (1985), who wrote about words—their origins, connotations and their usage in clusters by different groups—proposed 'community' as one of the few consistently positive words in the English language.

Clusters of words powerfully capture our thinking through their associations or connotations, with meanings changing over time and dependent upon context and the audience. Words associated with community include everyday words such as neighbourhood, local, group, company, identity, familiar, relational, social, conversation, and support (or 'pulling together in times of need'). In the New Zealand setting, the te reo Māori translation for 'community' is *hapori whānui* (*Te Ara* 2015) meaning 'wider family, the public or community'.

When examining community in terms of educational/social theory, theorists such as Wenger (2009), who considered "learning to be part of human nature" (p. 209) come to mind. He suggested that our participation in social settings "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (p. 214). He proposed the notion of *communities of practice* which encompasses identity, meaning, practice, community (p. 211) -are present everywhere (p. 212), and they are "relevant to daily actions, our policies, and the technical, organisational and educational systems we design" (p. 216). It is the development of members' identity, shared meanings, creativity, and a sense of belonging that grows through daily activity and relationships within these communities which support professional learning.

Wenger's theory has been broadened to include professional learning communities. Hargreaves and Goodson consider that the concept of professional learning communities is "one of the most promising and widely adopted initiatives to improve the quality of professional learning and knowledge in schools" (2007, p. xviii). Penlington would agree: "The activity of engaging in a dialogue with colleagues or experienced others is one that lies at the heart of many professional learning models for teachers" (Penlington, 2008, p. 1304). However, Lieberman (2007) questions if developing and sustaining professional learning communities are important because "the idea of social relationships has finally been recognised as an important condition for the growth and nourishment of intellectual ideas" (2007, p.199). Learning communities that act as communities of learning, then, are dependent on relationships that are built through interactions, including conversations between members of these groups.

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In education, teachers, along with other school staff, are a ‘community of learners’. The quality of learning within this community relies on interaction through talking with each other. In local and national education contexts, teacher talk concerning goal setting, (accelerated) learning achievement, and assessment is common. Differences in thinking and understanding invariably become the source of conversational challenges but are also opportunities for developing further understanding and theorising practice. For communities of learning to succeed, conversations must be respectful, for as Chaplin and O’Connor (2007) explain, “Discourse is respectful when each person’s ideas are taken seriously and no one is ridiculed or insulted. Discourse is respectful when no one is ignored” (p. 104). Therefore, it is crucial that teachers sustain ongoing professional conversations relating to practices, processes and principles.

One benefit of the New Zealand’s National Standards policy that operated from 2009 to 2017, was the required development of more formal moderation practices. The Ministry of Education noted principles required for quality moderation include tolerance of different views, openness to different views, and willingness to adapt thinking Ministry of Education, 2014a) and open-mindedness to new information and perspectives, professional respect and trust (Ministry of Education, 2014b). Although Wylie found the Ministry’s assumption of productive professional talks challenged schools’ current capabilities (2014), teachers and school leaders have developed their self-knowledge, understanding and practice of quality professional talk. Quality professional talk requires the ability to ask good questions, the ability to explain one’s own thinking, the ability to examine language and vocabulary used, care for others and a belief in the purpose of moderation.

Just as there are different kinds of questions, there are different kinds of conversation exchanges. We need to take a closer look at the elements within our professional learning dialogue and “acknowledge that not all dialogues are going to be equally useful in catalysing change in teacher practice” (Penlington, 2008, p. 1315). Penlington went on to say, “In order to be effective, the focus of teacher–teacher dialogue needs to shift away from examining teaching activities, and to look more at teacher reasoning as the focus for effective outcomes” (p. 1315). What is possible is illustrated in Hill and Sewell’s (2010) study. They report on a professional learning group that combined teachers’ talk about their practice activities with attention to their beliefs and reasoning. A small professional community of practice met regularly to share reflections, goal setting and their actions as well as report on evidence collection and to undertake analysis. This group worked as support of Hill’s pedagogical shift concerning the development of a community of learners in his class, requiring him to share power with his students. Stories presented by peers and in literature and the use of learning theory acted together to help Hill adopt a different perspective. Both Hill’s group and his class needed time set aside as a routine or habit in order for a sense of community to develop. While it is important that our conversation support better teaching practice and enhance the learning experience for students, it is also important to dialogue with our colleagues and support their learning. An alternate model is the bottom up “informal teaching and learning community” or cluster described by Aitken (2017, p.1 ). In this case, the community emerged organically from a shared interest in the Mantle of the Expert pedagogical approach and a desire to support practice. The participants met at each other’s schools and were responsive to each other’s needs and their needs as a group. Dialogue was an important aspect, with participants sharing their classroom interactions, and exploring both research and practice. Productive partnerships were formed between the participants over time leading to “meaningful outcomes” for classroom teachers as they gained expertise and support, and for the tertiary partners when research opportunities arose and the cluster shepherded teachers as students into further study (p. 4 ).

Teachers need to be learners for their ongoing professional growth in pedagogy, implementation of new policy, and understanding of new diversities of students within historical, social, economic, political, national and international change. Much of this learning takes place on site through experience and reflection as well as through organised professional development opportunities.

As teachers of students, we are confident in our knowledge of the characteristics of learners. A list of these might include such terms as motivation, effort, organisation, optimism, flexibility, self-knowledge, willingness to ask questions, ability to accept feedback, persistence and risk taking. But teachers need to apply these same characteristics to their own approaches to learning. Feeling

uncomfortable, risking being embarrassed by one ‘stupid’ question or revealing we are not as ‘smart’ ‘together’ or ‘capable’ as we would like others to believe. Penlington proposed that “We also need to acknowledge that dissonance is an important part of growth and development of insight and reasonableness in teacher development” (2008, p. 1315). One person’s willingness to openly share a frustration or struggle, that is supportively and understandingly received, can ripple through a group, thus providing a model, and reassurance of a safe place, to share and for others to also be more open about what they need help with.

There are links between opportunities for collaboration as a team and the development of trust and commitment in members of that team. Tschannen-Moran found “a significant link between collaboration with the principal and trust in the principal, collaboration with colleagues [teachers] and trust in colleagues, and collaboration with parents and trust in parents” (2001, p. 308). Trust was also a factor in Park, Henkin, & Egley’s (2005) study. In this study responses of primary school teachers were gathered on measures of teamwork skills, affective and cognition-based trust, and team commitment. These authors found that a significant predictor of teacher team commitment was teamwork. Those with a higher level of teamwork skills believed there were higher levels of commitment to the team. Results from this study also suggested the importance of trust in teacher commitment: “Trust is indispensable for successful cooperation and communication; foundations of productive group relationships” (Baier, 1986 in Park, Henkin, Egley, 2005, p. 472). Working and learning together depends on trust, and, at the same time, develops trust through individual and group relationships.

According to James, Dunning, Connolly, and Elliott (2007) collaboration has three elements: a primary task that provides the purpose, reflection on and in action, and collaboration. These authors present a primary task as having two inter-related dimensions: “The first defines ‘what is to be done’ in the present, the second defines what is to be done to improve the work that is to be undertaken in the future. Importantly, the primary task also provides a purpose and rationale for collaboration” (2007, p. 550). The implementation of a new national policy, an inquiry project, or the enactment in practice of a school or teacher-led initiative is a likely set of primary tasks for groups of teachers within or across schools.

Just like the primary task has two dimensions, reflective practice also has a focus on current effective practice and on future improvements. For these authors, current practice and efforts to improve future practice are optimised through teachers’ reflection in action and “Reflection on action enables the evaluation of, and learning from, current practice. It also enables the evaluation of attempts to improve future practice and learning from attempts to improve future practice. “(James, Dunning, Connolly, & Elliott, 2007, p. 550). Familiar to many educators is the work of Smith, (2002), who, drawing on Stephen Brookfield’s work, (see 2017, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed), discusses four ways of stimulating ongoing learning through reflection. These are 1) learning from seeing ourselves through autobiography, 2) seeing ourselves through our students’ eyes, 3) seeing ourselves through literature and 4) seeing ourselves *through our colleagues’ eyes* [emphasis added]. Learning occurs in collaboration: that is, learning in, through and as a group.

Collaboration - or joint working, as these authors called it - looked this way in school practice: Working relationships were secure and straightforward, which enhanced the collective authority of the staff. Communication appeared easy and open and the staff appeared to be very comfortable with each other. They knew each other’s strengths and weaknesses, help was given and received easily and members of staff were ready and willing to share their expertise. (James, Dunning, Connolly, & Elliott, 2007, p. 548).

We can ask ourselves if this is what our professional learning community, teacher network, action research group or teacher inquiry syndicate should look like?

At their core, professional learning communities can be seen by principals, school leaders, education administrators and policymakers “not to improve teacher morale or technical skill” (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 3), but to serve student needs. The effectiveness of professional learning communities is typically evaluated based on the collective purpose of enhancing students’ learning. The attention to consequences or outcomes, we suggest, likely undermines the other processual aspects noted above.

By positioning teachers as ‘instruments’ for students’ learning with a focus on evidence-based improvement of teacher competencies, an environment of relentless, pressured, high-stakes accountability and top-down procedures for ‘supporting’ individuals to ‘grow’ will undermine their capacity to do so. Growth, professional or otherwise, is not continuous. To expect continuous growth is to expect too much. Time is needed to step back, pause, reflect, look around and adjust our directions. Growth requires nourishment as well as exercise.

In this piece, we intended to encourage teachers to work collaboratively for their own wellbeing and in order to support an “empowering, imaginative and inclusive vision” for teaching (Hargreaves and Goodson, 2007, p. xviii). Stoll and Louis (2007) wrote that professional learning communities exist when the following four factors are evident (p. 2). Teachers in professional learning communities:

- Share as a group;
- Critically interrogate their practice;
- Reflect, collaborate, include, and promote learning-orientations and growth in their interactions and actions as a group; and
- Consider their activity as a serious collective enterprise.

These aspects require openness, trust in relationship(s) and in risk taking, hopefulness and time.

Our conversations with colleagues can be valued as occasions for learning and enhancing the experiences of our professional lives. Such conversations help sustain us in meaningful professional work through facilitating a sense of collegiality, providing an opportunity for service and care for people and the organisation, and developing our individual conceptual thinking, inquiry and practice. Our message is to encourage conviviality and awareness of the nature of professional talk in order to enrich and further our own understandings, in order to gain insights and theorise practice and experience a kind, sustaining and sustainable work environment.

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