



What are we learning about facilitating impactful PLCs?

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The GTA PNC supported by Steven Katz, Ph.D., Lorna Earl, Ph.D. & Cathy Hands, Ph.D.



This research was anchored in a GTA PNC capacity building project focused on facilitating impactful PLCs. Ten boards (and over 130 individuals) participated in this project and participants included a representation of various key roles – Supervisory Officers, Central Office Curriculum Coordinators/Consultants, and School Administrators. This research looked at data from all participants as well as a subset of 5 individuals (representing the various roles) whose work on facilitating impactful PLCs that use evidence to create and share professional knowledge was studied more closely.



The GTA PNC has engaged in a series of projects which has included building the capacity of the facilitator as a key component of going to scale. More specifically, building the understanding of what facilitation *entails* – rather than the facilitation *role* – has framed an important capacity building agenda for the PNC. Most boards are using the concept of the professional learning community (PLC) as the locus for the requisite professional learning in some kind of way. Professional learning communities, in theory, exist to create the conditions by which evidence-driven inquiry opportunities challenge existing thinking and practice. This is a necessary enabler of the focused professional learning that is the foundation of high quality classroom practice that, in turn, is the most powerful predictor of student learning and achievement.



PLCs exist at multiple levels; they can be within or across schools and they can involve different kinds of people. The proliferation of PLCs on the education landscape has far outpaced the associated research base in relation to their effectiveness as venues for actually changing practice that will impact on student achievement. What little research we do have, however, suggests that for the most part PLCs are not impactful because they don't effectively create the conditions for the kind of focused professional learning that we are talking about here. This is why intentional facilitation is essential. This research worked to explicitly unpack the nature of the facilitation role in creating, supporting, and sustaining impactful PLCs.

What does it mean to be part of a PLC? ...Pretty much everything!

- “We read and share professional articles and books in our team meetings.”
- “A community of learners, especially in this school, means that we speak the same language.”
- “A community of learners is, first of all, empowering people to have a sense of parity within the system where they will have equal input into that process.”
- “Continuous, continuous, continuous contact, continuous involvement, continuous dialogue, continuous problem-solving, continuous identifying strengths and weaknesses. It is continuity of effort.”
- “Teachers get a chance to share ideas through their work – best practices, instructional practices.”

Supovitz, 2006

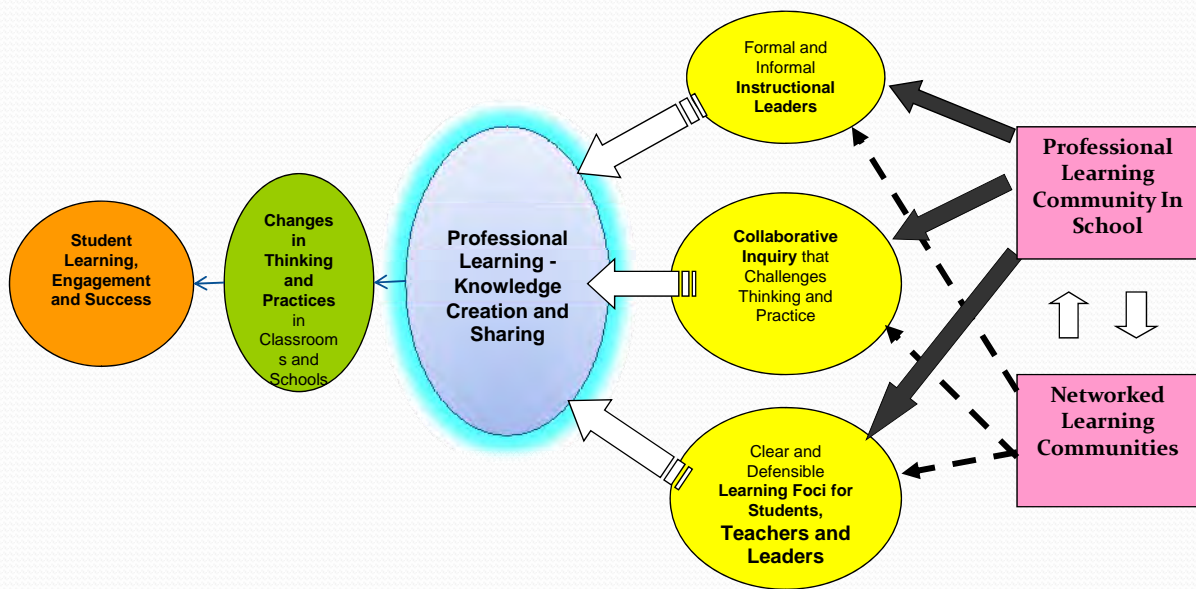
But... the rhetoric has outpaced the research!

- The power of the idea of a PLC is that members of the group... engage together in challenges of practice so that their understanding of those challenges grows deeper and is more unified. Through their investigations, proposed solutions emerge that are then tested to see if they help... Through such a repeated process, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful and the group develops a tighter sense of camaraderie and common purpose. As a result, they can construct common understanding, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals. This form of professional learning communities was largely absent from the district, and the examples [school practitioners] did provide were too diffused and unfocused to have a strong influence on their practice. Activities like book talks and in-school professional development sessions were too sparse and diffused to fulfill the particular goals promised by PLCs.

Supovitz (2006)

Conceptual Framework

Enabling Professional Learning (Katz et al., 2009)



Facilitation Capacities:

- Support Impactful Professional Learning Communities with:
 - Clear and Defensible Foci Based on Evidence of Need
 - Embedded Collaborative Inquiry For New Learning
 - Instructional Leadership for Productive Changes in Practice and in Student Learning

Focus is foremost!

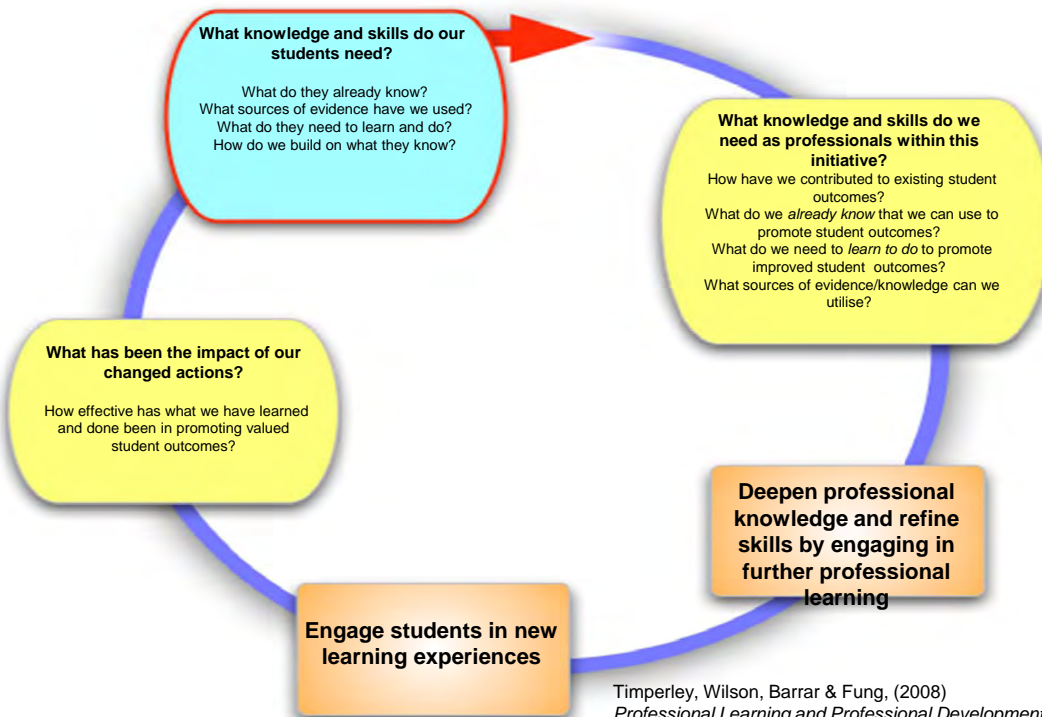
- Focus as a LEARNING focus
- From student learning need → teacher learning need → leader learning need
- Postholing: Conducting in-depth explorations of an important but bounded slice of the subject, how it is learned, and how it is taught

Collaborative Inquiry – 7 Key Elements

- Creating context
- Engaging in “question-driven” inquiry
- Generating working theories
- Critical evaluation
- Searching for new information
- Engagement in deepening inquiry
- Shared expertise

Hakkarainen et al. (2004)

From student learning to professional learning



Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, (2008)
Professional Learning and Professional Development: Best Evidence Synthesis
www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/ibes/15341

Impactful Leadership Dimensions

(Robinson, 2007)

- Establishing goals and expectations (ES=0.35)
- Strategic resourcing (ES=0.34)
- Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (ES=0.42)
- Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (ES=0.84)
- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (ES=0.27)

Research Methodology

- Participants: 135 members from 10 GTA PNC school districts (supervisory officers, principals, vice principals, consultants/coaches)
- Research Tools
 - Facilitator assessment tool: a set of indicators and contra indicators were developed and organized according to the three key enablers of impactful professional learning. The tool provided space for documenting evidence and actions to be taken. (See attached)
- Individual facilitator interview protocol:
 - 45- to 60-minute semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 5 participants
 - Questions addressed a) facilitators' professional background and descriptions of their PLCs, b) descriptions of their conversations around learning foci, c) the nature of the conversations in PLC meetings, d) vision and focus development, e) how foci are maintained over time, f) members' access to resources, g) what helps and what makes it difficult to facilitate PLCs
 - Additional questions were added, based on participants' responses on their assessment tools

Methodology, cont'd

- Procedure and Data Collection Strategy
 - Participants were taught to: use the tool, analyze areas of challenge for their PLCs, determine next steps, and engage in “critical friend” discussions to give feedback to facilitator colleagues about their PLCs’ progress on the basis of evidence collected
 - Assessment tool was to be completed by all participants, submitted at least two times over 5 months
 - 2 interviews were conducted with 5 participants (a curriculum coordinator, a principal, a leadership consultant, a numeracy consultant, and a supervisory officer). Each interview was conducted after a tool submission
 - Additional information was obtained through problem-solving with participants via e-mail between meetings
- Data analysis
 - Document analysis, interviews, observations
 - Coding and the extraction of themes
 - Constant comparative analysis across interview transcripts, and assessments



Research Findings

Learning Foci - Indicators

- Facilitators indicated that:
 - Foci are linked to improving student learning experiences (75%)
 - compared to: 67% of the participants stated that the foci address adults' learning needs, which are directly related to student' needs
 - There is shared knowledge among PLC members and/or school members (75%)
 - There are common goals among PLC members (75%)
 - Foci are important and target specific aspects of an issue (50%)

Learning Foci – Contra Indicators

- 42% of the participants noted a lack of purposeful coherence, and foci don't address the PLC goals
 - Professional learning needs are varied; not all are engaged or responsive to school focus
 - New members to PLC require background information before moving forward with foci
 - Decisions not based on data
- 33% of the participants mentioned that PD opportunities are limited or few
 - PLCs are the PD vehicle
 - Access varies depending on different departments and schools
 - PLCs are not at the point yet where they can effectively use PD
 - Members struggle with maintaining the focus and not abandoning the “real work”

Collaborative Inquiry - Indicators

- Facilitators indicated that:
 - All of the individuals who have knowledge and influence on the learning foci are included in the PLC (87%)
 - Conversations are about what members “think” and why (80%)
 - Discussions target ways to improve student learning experience (67%)
 - Existing presuppositions, knowledge and theories are questioned (67%)

Collaborative Inquiry Indicators Continued

- Facilitators indicated that:
 - New ways of sharing and interaction, and professional development related to the focus was available to PLC members (53%)
 - Group members look for and work with new information around the focus topic (50%)
 - Innovative solutions are developed (20%)
 - Group members assess the strengths and weaknesses of theories (20%)

Collaborative Inquiry – Contra Indicators

- 47% of the participants noted that discussions reproduce or encourage existing processes in the PLC or school
 - Leading colleagues is problematic for PLC members; they avoid difficult conversations
 - Not all perspectives are available for open discussion; some members hold back; no real analysis of the teaching
 - Some resistance to change, some discussion around what is already happening
 - Some strong union voices
- 40% of the participants mentioned that conversations target external circumstances to explain the issues or experienced problems
 - Cultural background and background experiences of students, language challenges, SES challenges with various families, boy-girl ratio, etc.
 - Some talk about things members and faculty cannot control
 - Resistance to initiative; issues such as the time required, work overload, and student characteristics surfaced in discussions

Formal Leadership

- Facilitators pointed out that:
 - Intellectual and material support (time and resources for focused professional learning) was provided (92%)
 - Formal leaders were responsible for, and monitored the school improvement process (83%)
 - Leaders were engaged in vision and focus development (75%)
- Formal leaders help keep the focus when other initiatives are being encouraged (58%)

Informal Leadership

- Facilitators indicated that:
 - Informal leaders created plans, coordinated activities, evaluated progress (67%)
 - Informal leaders facilitated colleagues' access to resources (58%)
 - Professional learning deepened professional knowledge and skills refinement (50%)
 - Informal leaders distributed information about school activities to families and/or the public (42%)
 - Informal leaders helped to keep the focus when other initiatives are encouraged (42%)

Informal Leadership Continued

- BUT
 - 42% of the participants noted that leadership roles are not distributed among school members with and without formal authority position. For example:
 - The literacy lead teacher met resistance from a variety of staff members: her role as “literacy leader” was not embraced by staff
 - Formal leaders met to discuss goals for PLC sessions, but informal leaders were not included in discussion
 - 33% of the participants stated that support is not available to build capacity. For example:
 - Time and money constraints in a small school
 - Resistance from some members of staff who will not do the “work” without time provided to do so
 - Members of PLC are overwhelmed by numerous initiatives from board and Ministry

What Supports Facilitators' Work

- Support from a network of colleagues
 - System leaders (SOs): commitment to PLCs in the district, feedback and reflection from SOs
 - Network (of within-school PLCs) provides resources (e.g., professional reading), walk-throughs and feedback
 - Familiarity with colleagues and supervisors results in more established relationships, building working relationships with PLC members, understanding colleagues' thinking
- Trust
- Experience
 - Facilitator has done lots of professional reading that others don't have time for
 - Breadth of other work with PLCs: lots of experience with PLCs; work with one PLC informs work with others
 - Facilitator has longevity, credibility, and a track record
- "Time is very precious"
 - Time needed to strategically arrange faculty into productive working groups
 - For PLC meetings
 - To engage in teaching practice around learnings derived from the focus
 - District supportive with giving teachers extra time to look at school improvement, which gives them another opportunity to reflect and work together
- Funding creates buy in: "This is our focus, and here's how I'll support you."
 - Access to resources such as books, research money
- Accountability
 - Members are not accountable to facilitator, so there is no compliant behaviour
 - PLC members hold themselves accountable, there is a willingness of members and commitment to the task
 - Knowing that their activities are noticed by others

What Constrains Facilitators' Work

- District policy and structures
 - Facilitators' responsibilities across departments can conflict
 - Policy prohibits the use of internet tools for communication in the absence of board-developed tools; PLC members who are separated by distance have difficulty communicating with one another
- Lack of time
 - PLC members are busy, and have difficulty finding time to do the type of reflective, critical thinking needed
 - Limited time to meet in the PLC: difficulty deepening learning when PLC members only meet a couple of times
 - Facilitation schedules: if working with a number of PLCs, working back-to-back with them is overwhelming, tiring, and "very difficult"

What Constrains Facilitators' Work (continued)

- Buy-in and trust
 - Some resistance among members when the school is identified as needing support
 - Principal does not attend PLC meetings; this sends a message to faculty who are PLC members
 - Some tension among members related to issues of control or fear that performance is criticized
 - Difficulty getting into classes to work on strategies for changing practice
 - Some PLC members are negative, do not want to “step up” and take an active role, or do not always follow through with activities
- Hierarchy: facilitator's position of formal authority
 - Balancing formal position as a school leader with evaluative power (and others' expectations for the leader's omniscience), with being a lead learner among members
 - Facilitating the work of PLC members who have more formal authority

Facilitation matters!

- Facilitation as a role not a person
- Facilitate what? Focused professional learning that takes the form of deep understanding or conceptual change
- Facilitation redefined: From aggregation and confirmation to **interruption** (of a status quo)

Aporia Consulting Ltd. 2009

The nature of interruptions/ What needs interrupting?

- The culture of activity; from activity-based to learning-based.
- The culture of conservation, preservation, and justification (of practice)
- Imposter syndrome
- Conflation of person and practice (and thus what being evaluative means)
- The culture of niceness
- The conception of leadership as “lead knower” rather than “lead learner”

Katz, in press