An Investigation of Leadership in a Professional Learning Community: A Case Study of

a Large, Suburban, Public Middle School

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Abstract: This qualitative case study investigated a large, suburban, public middle

school focusing on educators' perceptions of leadership within their professional learning

community. Participants included the principal, administrative team, and key faculty

members. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and were analyzed by

hand coding and Nudist software. Findings indicated the principal has the ability to

recognize leadership qualities in others, the school's mission/vision is connected to

student learning, a leadership team supports and maintains the professional learning

community, communication and collaboration are important to a professional learning

community, coaching and mentoring assist in developing teachers and empowering

others to take leadership roles, and the development of a learning organization promotes

growth, learning, and empowerment opportunities for all.

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Introduction

Recent reform efforts have placed enormous pressure and anxiety on teachers to raise and enhance students' achievement levels and learning outcomes in all subject areas. Most teachers encounter professional environments plagued with persistent work-related problems such as: isolation from colleagues, unnecessary or illogical time constraints, limited knowledge bases, and scarce resources (Louis & Smith, 1992). These settings are often not conducive to increasing teacher effectiveness or, ultimately, to improving student learning. For teachers to accomplish reform goals effectively, schools must develop appropriate structural and social conditions focused on student achievement (Louis & Kruse, 1995). These conditions constitute what most educators have labeled professional learning communities (Hord, 1997; Louis & Kruse; Sergiovanni, 1996).

Literature Review

A review of the literature indicates that the development of professional learning communities is the organizational strategy that could make school reform more successful (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman, 2001; Louis & Kruse, 1995). Additionally, strong professional learning communities enhance learning outcomes for students. Teachers and administrators who have created structures that enhance communication and collaboration around shared norms and values within learning communities have shown increases in student achievement (DuFour & Eaker; Louis & Kruse).

Professional learning communities emerge from organizational learning, transformational leadership, creating a school as a community, and educational

administration literature (Argyris, 1978; Hoy & Miskel, 1996; Huber, 1991; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994). Professional learning communities have also been linked to Senge's description of learning organizations in which "people continually expand their capacity to create desired results, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). Organizational learning theory provides a lens to view and understand school change as school leaders and teachers create professional learning communities within their school sites.

Schools as Learning Organizations

Peter Senge (1990), author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* developed the concept of learning organizations. Senge views learning organizations as capable of "discovering how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels" (p. 3). The learning organization model incorporates a systems theory approach that addresses the organization as a whole and examines the interrelationships that exist within the organization. Senge identifies five key disciplines of learning organizations:

- Personal Mastery – the discipline of learning to expand one's personal capacity to create the results one truly desires, through continually clarifying and deepening one's personal vision

- Mental Models – the discipline of reflecting, clarifying and improving deeply-ingrained assumptions that influence how people understand the world and how they shape actions

- Shared Vision – the discipline of building a shared vision of the future with a set of principles and guiding practices

- Team Learning – the discipline of transforming collective thinking skills so that people can develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of the individual members' talent

- Systems Thinking – the discipline of understanding the system as a whole, not as individual parts (pp. 7-10).

The concept of learning organizations originated in the business world as an approach to helping organizations learn faster than the competition. This concept has emerged within education to promote teacher and student learning in schools. According to this approach, in order for teachers to adequately prepare students, they must be involved in a continuous learning process focused on new and expansive patterns of thinking.

A variety of research within school settings supports the concept of learning organizations in schools (Brown & Sheppard, 1999; Fullan; 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1995; Louis, 1994). Fullan (2001) contends that if school leaders are to be successful in creating meaningful change, they must develop learning organization environments, which are built on teacher and student learning. However, in spite of such support, the learning organization concept in education requires further empirical study focused on leadership practices within schools and relevance to teacher and student learning.

Organizational Learning Theory

Most of the common language associated with learning in schools involves professional development, mental models, systems thinking (Senge, 1990), double-loop

learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978), reflection (Louis & Kruse, 1995), and continuous improvement. Organizational learning is defined in a variety of ways. Rait (1995) summarizes three definitions as (1) altering behaviors through information gathering (Huber, 1991), (2) creating innovative, new insights and knowledge (Hedberg, 1981), and (3) detecting and correcting errors (Argyris & Schon). Stata (1989) further defines organizational learning as building on past knowledge and experience combined with sharing insights, knowledge, and mental models. Senge describes these mental models as deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, and/or images that guide daily actions. The challenge for organizations, specifically schools, involves uncovering these assumptions to eliminate one of the many hidden barriers to learning.

Most recently, discussions on organizational learning and restructuring have also focused on the concepts of single and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning, according to Argyris and Schon (1978), entails working within governing variables while not questioning existing goals, values, plans, and rules. Single-loop learning is relatively superficial and relies deeply on existing organizational routines. The organization must carry on its present policies, without questioning underlying values, norms, and policies (Argyris & Schon).

Double-loop learning, on the other hand, reflects a deeper exploration into the underlying assumptions and beliefs in the organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cousins, 1998). Double-loop learning involves detecting and correcting errors within an organization's underlying norms, policies, and rules. Related to schools, double-loop learning entails having both teachers and administrators examine values that guide their behaviors on a day-to-day basis. The following questions are often asked: What

assumptions guide our practices? How can we, as administrators and teachers, merge new learning with existing organizational knowledge? How can we modify existing norms and policies? How can we collectively learn to use innovations to enhance our teaching and learning?

Learning loop	Learning domain	Learning category	Learning outcome
single	rules	must, have to, can	improvement
double	insights	know, understand	innovation

Categories of organizational learning and its outcomes (Vooght, Lagerweij & Louis, 1998, p. 243).

Building on the organizational development literature, it is clear that for organizational learning to occur, emphasis needs to be placed on the potential of altering the structures of schools and examining the underlying values that guide behaviors (Garvin, 1993). Altering the structure of schools translates into providing teachers with time to talk and meet, improving communication structures, and increasing interdependent teaching roles. Examining underlying values and behaviors entails promoting reflective dialogue, creating a common language, and collaborating on ways to increase student learning (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Relative to reform and restructuring demands placed on school restructuring, it is clear that schools are structured for failure. Darling-Hammond (1996) critiqued a report labeled the *National Commission on Teaching and America's Future* and concluded that "most schools cannot produce the kind of learning demanded by new reform…because they do not know how, and the systems they work in do not support their efforts to do so" (p. 194). The commission further indicates that schools are presently structured for failure

and must redesign themselves as learning organizations, where learning is nurtured, collaborative, and continuous.

Professional Learning Community Model

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the process of making work environments more "professional" became a focus for restructuring within many schools (Louis & Marks, 1998). A study by Rosenholtz focused on teachers' workplace factors and maintained that teachers who felt supported in their classrooms were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation (Hord, 1997). Areas of support were defined as teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles. Little (1993) further explored a variety of ways in which policies and practices that focused on the utilization of professional networks supported teachers in comprehensive high schools. Louis and Kruse (1995) developed several programs of research conducted to identify the impact of professional learning communities within schools. In their research, a variety of issues, such as teachers' practices, student learning, shared norms and values, and reflective dialogue were examined (Louis & Kruse).

Two programs of research, in particular, have added to the professional learning community model. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) conducted a multi-school study, labeled the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary Teaching (CRC), which focused on identifying contextual factors associated with secondary teachers' professional dispositions. The CRC study identified a professional community in terms of technical culture, service ethic, and professional commitment. The study reported a strong relationship between the index of a professional community and the professional dispositions of teachers. Essentially, teachers who participated in strong professional

communities had higher levels of professionalism. Findings also indicated that when experienced teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry, a larger body of knowledge was shared and utilized (McLaughlin & Talbert).

The second program of research, conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) involved a series of investigations on a sample of 11,000 students enrolled in 820 secondary schools involved in extensive restructuring and the development of school-wide professional communities (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Newmann & Whelage, 1995). Schools selected were involved in major restructuring efforts for several years. Data collection involved interviews with teachers, administrators, important individuals within the outside community, and district administrators. All interview questions focused on issues such as school descriptors (i.e., staffing, organizational chart, and physical plant), decision-making processes, professional community patterns, and organizational learning practices. School-wide professional community, identified as a normative construct, was directed at staff members taking collective responsibility for the school as a whole in a collaborative manner (Sykes, 1999). Five elements emerged within the construct: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning, and collaboration.

Within the CORS study, schools that were characterized by professional learning communities had students who achieved greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than students in traditionally-organized schools. Also, achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller in schools organized as

professional learning communities than in schools organized in traditional manners (Hord, 1997; Newmann & Whelage, 1995).

Additionally, Stropkaj (2002) conducted a multi-site case study based on the framework of Louis and Kruse (1995) to explain how three principals in an elementary, middle, and high school developed professional learning communities and how the principals created and sustained the professional community environments. Findings indicated that both structural (i.e., physical proximity and time) and social/human resource conditions had a positive impact and enhanced relationships amongst faculty members and the principal (Stropkaj).

A professional community within schools refers to the process of promoting collaboration among staff members that increases interactions between the administration and teachers, with the goal of increasing student achievement (Louis et al., 1996; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Stropkaj, 2002). Focus is placed on decreasing isolation and supporting improved professional practices to increase student achievement. Because the professional community is a process-oriented model that is socially constructed within each particular work setting, many schools have different models, forms, or styles (Stropkaj).

<center>Methods</center>

The rationale for conducting a case study in this situation was to capture the atmosphere within a large, suburban, public middle school and focus on educators' perceptions and understandings of their professional learning community. According to Berg (2001), a case study involves assembling a large amount of data about a group in a detailed manner that assists researchers in comprehending how the group operates or

functions. Merriam (1988) further defines a case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit" (p. 21). For the current study, the meaning that educators at this middle school attributed to the concept of professional learning community was explored.

Research Questions

This case study addressed the following research questions:

1. How does a professional learning community operate and function at your school?

2. How has the leadership of the principal supported the development and maintenance of a professional learning community?

3. What structural conditions and social/human resource conditions exist that help maintain a professional learning community at your school?

Data Collection

This large, suburban, public middle school was selected for the study because the principal of the school is dedicated and committed to building a professional learning community. The school context offered a professional learning community as defined by Louis and Kruse (1995), and the principal and her professional staff were open to improvement through continually evolving learning communities that focused on student learning. Furthermore, the principal is an advocate of school-based research and firmly believes that this study will assist other school administrators and teachers in their understandings of professional learning communities.

The researchers utilized interviews and document analyses for data collection. During a two-month period, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with

general educators and administrators on the school leadership team. The goals of the semi-structured interview process were to find out how educators at this school perceived their realities (ontology) and created their understandings of a professional learning community (epistemology). The semi-structured interview protocol included nine open-ended questions; this allowed participants to elaborate on specific questions.

Important documents were analyzed to further understand the concept of professional community within this specific middle school. Such documents included floor plans of the building, daily bell schedules, memos from administrators, and other important documents related to professional development. These documents provided information that led to a better understanding of the structural conditions that promoted the development of the professional learning community.

Data Collection Instruments

Since the research was conducted within the conceptual framework of transformational leadership and professional learning communities as defined and described by Louis and Kruse (1995), specific questions were asked of all participants that pertained to these characteristics as well as structural conditions, and social and human dimensions. The researchers developed three interview protocols based on the review of the literature (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Leithwood, 1994; Louis & Kruse; Stropkaj, 2002). All three interview protocols addressed the same concepts, but were worded to elicit views from the various perspectives.

1).   Principal Interview Protocol (See Appendix A).

2).   Administrative Team Interview Protocol (See Appendix B).

3).   Key Faculty Member Interview Protocol (See Appendix C).

Participants

The primary participants in this study were divided into the following categories to better understand the characteristics of a professional learning community: principal (N-1), administrative team (N=5), and key faculty members -- department heads and team leaders (N=15).

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (1998), case study data analysis involves describing the case and its setting in a comprehensive manner. The first step of data analysis entailed describing the case as recorded by the researchers, often labeled the description phase. The second step, labeled categorical aggregation, involved the researchers looking for a collection of repeated instances from the data, in anticipation that issue-relevant meanings would emerge (Stake, 1995). The focus was on the emergence and development of themes. The third step, direct interpretation, involved looking at each single instance and attempting to draw meaning from this without looking for multiple instances. This entailed pulling the data apart and putting it back together in a more meaningful manner (Creswell). The fourth step involved establishing patterns and looking for correspondence between two or more categories in an attempt to establish a small number of categories (Stake). The final step involved developing naturalistic generalizations from analyzing the data. These generalizations included what was learned from the case study in a section labeled "lessons learned."

To ensure trustworthiness, Guba's (1981) model was used as the basis for establishing reliability and validity in this qualitative study. Goodness of information was enhanced through the use of triangulation, code-recode procedures, member checking,

peer examination, reflexivity strategies, and the researchers' examination of personal

biases.

Findings

The Principal's Ability to Recognize Leadership Qualities in Others

The principal discussed her belief that the professional learning community model

is based on discovering and identifying talented people and placing them in positions

where their talents can be fully developed. She identified these key people as the

instructional leaders of the school who have a shared vision for excellent teaching.

While discussing the principal's ability to recognize leadership qualities in others,

the administrative team and key faculty members noted how the principal, in her first two

years, methodically observed people, identified key individuals, formed groups, and

developed leaders. When participants further discussed the principal, they cited her

ability to provide direction and leadership to key faculty members in the building.

The School Developed a Mission/Vision Connected to Student Learning

Findings centered on the importance of developing and building a mission/vision

that was connected to student learning. Participants' responses fell into two coding trends

within this theme: the importance of having a plan to adequately build and develop a

professional learning community, and the implementation of a plan with form, function,

and structure to further strengthen the professional learning community.

The principal noted that the mission statement centers on student learning and

achievement in a safe, nurturing environment. The mission statement serves as the

framework for the school's operation. The principal strategically assigned different

faculty members into teams to accomplish a variety of goals related to the mission of the

school. The leadership team focused on student achievement, the Middle School Council team focused on emotional and social student issues, and the administrative team focused on the day-to-day operations of the building. In further discussing the mission of the school, the principal stated that all committees, groups, and/or councils must create a scaffolding that supports student achievement.

The administrative team discussed their professional functions and how these relate back to the mission and vision of the school. The key faculty members further noted that the school improvement plan, staff development, and daily schedule are geared toward student learning in the school. While discussing the principal, key faculty members emphasized the principal's strong vision and her ability to keep the entire staff focused on student learning.

A Leadership Team Supports and Maintains the Professional Learning Community

The leadership team is specifically involved in improving the curriculum as it relates to student achievement. The leadership team's sole function is to study data and to improve and enhance student performance.

The principal discussed her strong beliefs concerning the identification of teacher leaders and the development of a leadership team focused on teaching and learning. The principal further noted that the leadership team members are the instructional leaders within the school.

The administrative team discussed the benefits of having a leadership team and how they make the school function more effectively. Key faculty members noted the importance of a leadership team that guides the school's curriculum. Further supporting this theme, most key faculty members discussed the principal's development of the

leadership team to further support the professional learning community model and provide focus with regard to instruction at the school.

Communication and Collaboration are Important to Develop and Maintain a

Professional Learning Community

Findings revealed that effective communication and collaboration among staff members helps maintain the professional learning community. The principal noted the importance of building and providing communication structures within the school that allow teachers to connect, interact, make decisions, and move forward.

The administrative team described how teachers and administrators have opportunities to come together and communicate through established teams and groups. Most key faculty members stated the atmosphere is one of overall openness for teachers, so they have a chance to work together and discuss issues that need to be addressed or clarified.

Coaching and Mentoring Lead to Better Teacher Development and Empowerment for

Leadership Roles

Key faculty members serve as leaders and coaches/mentors for others and encourage better classroom teaching. The principal and administrative team discussed the importance of providing these leaders with opportunities to visit other teachers' classrooms to improve teaching practices and empower them to learn and grow as educators. When key faculty members mentioned their roles as coaches and mentors in the school, they noted they have full autonomy to help other teachers in their respective departments become better teachers.

A Learning Organization Promotes Growth, Learning, and Empowerment Opportunities

The principal frequently repeated the importance of developing an organization where people can interact, learn, and value their work. She further discussed the importance of developing structure that is conducive to interaction, growth, learning, reflection, and experimentation.

Most of the administrative team members further noted that staff members have many opportunities to learn and grow through staff development workshops, mentoring other teachers, and serving in leadership roles. All of the key faculty members discussed opportunities within the school to learn and grow as professionals. They expressed feelings of empowerment and growth in their leadership roles at the school.

Discussion

This discussion section corresponds to the major themes of the findings.

The Principal's Ability to Recognize Leadership Qualities in Others

The principal discussed her strong belief in identifying and empowering leaders in the school and the importance of placing these individuals in leadership positions. Additionally, the principal's administrative team and key faculty members noted the principal's ability to identify key individuals, form groups, and foster their development as leaders.

The principal's identification and empowerment of leaders as change agents is consistent with Bass's (1985) transformational leadership model, which focuses on the performance of followers and the maximization of followers toward their fullest potentials. Transformational leaders identify other leaders and move them to accomplish more than what is expected of them (Bass; Burns, 1978). In direct alignment with this concept, one key faculty member stated, "In the role and responsibilities the principal has

given me, I have become empowered to increase my knowledge and professionalism more than I would have expected." The findings of the current study are congruent with the literature and show that key faculty members were identified by the principal as leaders and encouraged to take leadership roles beyond those which were expected of them in most school settings.

The School Developed a Mission/Vision Connected to Student Learning

There is genuine value in the development and implementation of a mission/vision that is connected to student learning. The principal specifically stated that the mission statement is utilized as the foundation for the entire school's operation. The administrative team and key faculty members also noted that all teaching in the school is geared toward a mission statement that focuses on high student achievement and a safe, nurturing environment.

The importance of developing and building a school mission/vision with shared norms follows Leithwood's (1994) model of transformational leadership in schools and Senge's (1990) concept of a learning organization. Senge stresses the importance of developing a shared vision with a set of guiding principles and practices. Louis and Kruse (1995) further note that shared norms are essential underpinnings to building a professional learning community and that "Without a core of shared beliefs about institutional purposes, practices, and desired behaviors, the other elements of professional community cannot emerge" (p. 29).

All participants in this study noted the presence of a shared mission that directly relates to high student achievement and learning. The principal stated, "Student learning and achieving is our sole mission." Such responses are directly in line with elements of

Louis and Kruse's (1995) professional learning community model. Lee and Smith (1993) and Louis et al. (1994) further report strong relationships between teachers' collective responsibility for student learning and student achievement scores. While no data in the current study were collected related to teachers' collective responsibility for student learning and student achievement scores, it appears that a relationship might exist between these variables at this school.

A Leadership Team Supports and Maintains the Professional Learning Community

Through the implementation of a plan, the manifestation of form, function, and structure develops and strengthens the professional learning community. The structural issues directly relate to the development of a mission/vision that is connected to student learning. When the principal recounted issues surrounding structure and function, she emphasized the importance of having a structure in place that supports the mission/vision of the school. The administrative team and key faculty members similarly discussed the school's structure and leadership and elaborated on the importance of having a professional monthly calendar and holding leadership team meetings, department meetings, and staff development meetings to address various topics and goals.

Findings of the current study are consistent with Louis and Kruse's (1995) professional learning community model, which stresses the development of structural conditions. Louis and Kruse and Hord (1997) state that time must be built into the structure of a school day and calendar where staff can regularly come together for learning, decision-making, and problem-solving. Similar to the beliefs of Louis and Kruse and Hord, one administrative team member stated, "We publish a professional calendar every month…with certain times and days of the month that we have scheduled

meetings," and one key faculty member stated, "There are preset times for meetings within the structure of the building…where people have time to meet and talk."

A Leadership Team Supports and Maintains the Professional Learning Community

The principal, administrative team, and key faculty members reflected on the role of the leadership team as related to improving the curriculum and student achievement at the school. Findings further revealed that the leadership team is a critical component in setting school-wide goals that impact the curriculum as well as the delivery of instruction. The principal stated, "The leadership team as a group is recognized as the instructional leaders of the school. They define the order of instruction in the building." These findings are consistent with Louis and Kruse (1995), who indicate that teachers within a professional learning community become empowered not as individuals, but as a group or team through their collective actions. Senge (1990) discusses the importance of teams in transforming collective thinking so that people can develop greater intelligence and ability. Childs-Bowen, Moller, and Scrivner (2000) also discuss the importance of having structures or groups within schools that encourage teachers to become involved in setting school-wide goals.

According to the literature, the process of developing professional learning communities varies from school to school. The professional learning community model examined in the current study centers on the use of a leadership team that was created by the principal. Because each professional learning community model is site-specific, this school's professional learning community is unique.

Communication and Collaboration are Important to Develop and Maintain a

Professional Learning Community

Findings of the current study indicate that communication and collaboration exist between and among all faculty members. The principal noted the importance of providing specific structure and time, so people can meet and communicate. The principal further indicated that once the structure is established through a monthly professional calendar, staff development workshops, and study groups, "It is interesting to see the bonding among the teachers according to the patterns of the organizational structure that they are engaged in." The principal also noted the importance of email in "building strong communication." Raywid (1993), likewise, contends that time built into the structure of the school is essential for communication and learning to occur.

Administrative team members and most key faculty members mentioned that monthly meetings and email enhance communication and collaboration. Two administrative team members indicated there were too many meetings and time-commitments for teachers. These statements are not consistent with the literature regarding communication and collaboration in a professional learning community. Louis and Kruse (1995) maintain that time needs to be built into the school day and calendar, so staff can regularly come together for decision making and problem solving and that email should be used to facilitate communication and collaboration among staff members. Through communication and collaboration, the entire professional learning community can come to a deeper understanding of what it means to educate students within the school (Senge, Kleiner, Ross, & Smith, 1994).The current study found that these communication and collaboration structures exist within the school.

Coaching and Mentoring Lead to Better Teacher Development and Empowerment for Leadership Roles

Findings indicate participants' roles as coaches and mentors help others become leaders and better teachers within the classroom. The principal specifically noted that the "leadership team serves as coaches and mentors to others." A key faculty member stated, "That we influence other teachers and train them to know where we are going as a school. We serve as their mentors." The coaching and mentoring model at this school fits well with the concept of double-loop learning, which entails having professionals examine their guiding behaviors (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

Additionally, the literature indicates that deprivatization of teaching practices through coaching and mentoring, enhances teachers' senses of efficacy and has a positive consequence for the development and maintenance of a professional learning community (Hord, 1997; Louis, 1991; Louis & Kruse, 1995). Several participants noted that through sharing teaching practices, they found support, assistance, and trust. Louis (1992) further maintains that all staff members must be afforded opportunities to share opinions, ideas for improvement, and teaching innovations with each other. Findings of the current study indicate that coaching and mentoring provide teachers with these opportunities.

A Learning Organization Promotes Growth, Learning, and Empowerment Opportunities

The principal defined the importance of developing an organization where people can interact, learn, and value their work. Most participants stated the culture within their school promotes an ability to learn, grow, and become empowered as professionals. One key faculty member noted, "The role that I have been given has empowered me," and another key faculty member stated that "our whole community learns….we are learning and growing."

These findings are congruent with Senge's (1990) concept of the learning organization. Organizations can "tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels" (p. 3). In order for teachers to adequately prepare their students, teachers must be involved in a continuous learning process focused on new and expansive patterns of thinking. Studies by Brown and Sheppard (1999); Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1995) and Louis (1994) further indicate that learning organization environments within schools impact teacher and student learning. Principles of double-loop learning and transformational leadership are also synonymous with organizational learning in educational organizations (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Leithwood, 1992). All participants of the current study equated their success with their opportunities to continuously learn as teachers and leaders within their school.

Conclusions

The findings of this study support the following conclusions:

- The principal is a transformational leader and is able to recognize leadership qualities in others. This is essential to the development and maintenance of a professional learning community.

- The development of a mission and vision connected to student learning is one foundation of an effective professional learning community.

- Structure is important within a school that supports the mission and vision and strengthens the professional learning community.

- The development of a leadership team is central to the overall success of a professional learning community.

- Communication and collaboration are related to the development and maintenance of a professional learning community.

- Coaching and mentoring are effective tools for developing better teachers.

- A learning organization that promotes growth, learning, and empowerment relates to the success of a professional learning community.

Strengths/Limitations/Implications

This case study was limited to producing conclusions regarding the selected large, suburban, public middle school and the characteristics exhibited there of a professional learning community. Findings of the current study may be limited due to the small sample size and/or the homogeneity of the sample. All participants were Anglo and native speakers of English, which may have been a factor in facilitating a successful learning community. Findings also may not necessarily be generalized to other public or private schools. However, findings may be transferable to certain other settings. This transfer will be determined by the reader.

Additionally, all of the faculty were not represented in the data collection process, which may have limited the findings. Furthermore, the researchers have a favorable bias toward the development of professional learning communities in schools. Although the researchers used bracketing to limit bias, researcher feelings may have impacted findings.

The researchers were aware that other external factors might have impacted how administrators and faculty members developed and sustained a professional learning community at this school. Some external factors might have consisted of school board policies, school district management styles, and standardized testing requirements. None of these were considered in this study.

This study contributes to the literature relating to educational administration. The researchers hope that the findings of this study will assist school administrators and educators in their understanding of the leadership characteristics of a professional learning community. This study also contributes to the literature by providing real-life examples of transformational leadership in action. The leadership of the principal has a tremendous impact on the viability and success of the school. Principals may also utilize this information to make school reforms more successful and create structures within their schools that enhance communication and collaboration around shared norms and values.

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APPENDIX A

Principal Interview Protocol

1.)   How do you define a professional learning community?

2.)   How has your leadership supported the development and maintenance of a professional learning community? Please explain.

3.)   How do you present your vision and annual goals to your administrative team and faculty members?

4.)   What in the school would indicate that structural conditions such as time to meet and talk, physical proximity of classrooms, communication structure, interdependent teaching roles, and teacher empowerment currently exist that support the concept of a professional learning community and promote participation for all faculty members? Please elaborate regarding these various structural conditions.

5.)   What in the school would indicate that social and human resource conditions such an openness to improvement, trust and respect, access to expertise, supportive leadership, and socialization exist that support the concept of a professional learning community? Please elaborate regarding these various social and human resource conditions.

6.)   What activities of your teachers would indicate that they have an opportunity to reflect on their teaching, collaborate on student learning, and share and visit each other's classrooms to improve teaching practices?

7.)   What practices would indicate that the primary focus within the school is on student learning?

APPENDIX B

Administrative Team Interview Protocol

1.)   How do you define a professional learning community?

2.)   How has the principal's leadership supported the development and maintenance of a professional learning community?

3.)   How does the administrative team assist in presenting the vision and annual goals to faculty members?

4.)   What in the school would indicate that structural conditions such as time to meet and talk, physical proximity of classrooms, communication structure,

interdependent teaching roles, and teacher empowerment currently exist that support the concept of a professional learning community and promote participation for all faculty members? Please elaborate regarding these various structural conditions.

5.)   What in the school would indicate that <u>social and human resource conditions</u> such an openness to improvement, trust and respect, access to expertise, supportive leadership, and socialization exist that support the concept of a professional learning community? Please elaborate regarding these various social and human resource conditions.

6.)   What activities of your teachers would indicate that they have an opportunity to reflect on their teaching, collaborate on student learning, and share and visit each other's classrooms to improve teaching practices?

7.)   What practices would indicate that the primary focus within the school is on student learning?

8.)   How do the administrators and teachers collaborate on issues related to student learning?

APPENDIX C

Key Faculty Member Interview Protocol

1.)   How do you define a professional learning community?

2.)   How has the principal's leadership supported the development and maintenance of a professional learning community?

3.)   How does the principal present her vision and annual goals to the staff members?

4.)   What in the school would indicate that <u>structural conditions</u> such as time to meet and talk, physical proximity of classrooms, communication structure, interdependent teaching roles, and teacher empowerment currently exist that support the concept of a professional learning community and promote participation for all faculty members? Please elaborate regarding these various structural conditions.

5.)   What in the school would indicate that <u>social and human resource conditions</u> such an openness to improvement, trust and respect, access to expertise, supportive leadership, and socialization exist that support the concept of a professional learning community? Please elaborate regarding these various social and human resource conditions.

6.)   What activities would indicate teachers have an opportunity to reflect on their teaching, collaborate on student learning, and share and visit each other's classrooms to improve teaching practices?

7.)   What practices would indicate that the primary focus within the school is on student learning?

8.)   How do the administrators and teachers collaborate on issues related to student learning?