Supervisor Transformation within a Professional Learning Community

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High-quality professional development is defined as having the characteristics of longevity, context specificity, teacher voice, collaboration, and follow-up (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lang & Fox, 2003; Lieberman, 1995; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Richardson, 2003). Effective professional development is "grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that are participant driven" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 597). One vehicle for professional development that adheres to the principles inherent in high-quality professional development is professional learning communities (PLCs). Also referred to as communities of practice (Wenger 1998), these communities are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

Professional learning communities are named as contexts that are ripe for members to engage in

transformation (Servage, 2008). Transformation is process that occurs when a learner engages in critical reflection on their assumptions and beliefs resulting in adapting existing frames of reference or adopting new frames of reference for viewing the world (Mezirow, 2000). This study includes data from a PLC of prospective teacher field supervisors who focused on bringing an equity focus to their supervision practice. This article will explore the transformation in a PLC and the key elements that supported transformation for three field supervisors. Additionally, in order to more adequately portray the integrated nature and complexity of these elements, implications for understanding and fostering transformation within PLCs are presented.

Theoretical Framework

Professional Learning Communities

Wenger et al. (2002) describe communities of practice as (1) possessing a shared concern or domain of interest that provides the community with a unique identity, (2) engaging in joint activities and discussions, and (3) developing a shared practice that includes developing strategies for solving problems. As the PLC members meet over time, they "develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5). During these meetings, communities work to solve problems, discuss individual situations and needs, talk about common concerns, act as sounding boards, develop personal relationships and patterns of interacting, tell stories, and coach each other.

In a PLC, knowledge is not viewed as an object or something that can be owned. Instead, knowledge "resides in the skills, understanding, and relationship of members as well as in the tools, documents, and processes that embody aspects of this knowledge" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 11). Wenger (1998) points to the fact that, in order for collegial learning to take place within a PLC, there must be deliberate attention to both practice and the community itself. PLCs can become venues for problem solving and inquiry as the community encourages greater supported risk taking (Englert & Tarrani, 1995; Snow-Gerono, 2005).

PLCs are lauded as a positive reform in professional development where "through collaborative inquiry, teachers explore new ideas, current practice, and evidence of student learning using processes that respect them as experts on what is needed to improve their own practice and student learning" (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 90). An overwhelming portion of the literature on PLCs focuses on descriptions of programs, teacher perceptions, and learning community characteristics (Vescio et al., 2008). However, relatively little research examines the specific interactions and dynamics by which a PLC constitutes a resource for learning and innovations in practice (Little, 2003; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

Transformative Learning Theory

One theory of adult learning, transformative learning, can be defined as:

> The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7-8)

Transformation may occur dramatically after a pivotal event or experience termed a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 1990) or a gradual process over time (Cranton, 2002; Taylor, 2000). Transformation involves understanding the personal assumptions and frames of reference that filter one's view of the world as well as analyzing the assumptions and frames of others. While engaging in the process of transformation, the learner adds to these existing frames of reference or develops new frames of reference (King, 2002, 2004; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Transformation does not occur in isolation, but through discourse with others (Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2003) uses the term *discourse* to describe dialogue that involves the "assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values" (p. 59). Discourse is about "finding agreement, welcoming difference, 'trying on' other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing" (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 11-12). Another key concept associated with transformation is critical reflection or "critique on the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 1). Brookfield (1995, 2000) explains that critical reflection also involves ideological critique by examining issues of power and uncovering hegemonic assumptions. Critical reflection should not be equated with transformative learning because one can engage in critical reflection and still not transform; however, critical reflection must be present for transformative learning to occur (Brookfield, 2000). Over time, scholars have critiqued transformative learning theory, calling for viewing the process as less linear, thinking about greater complexity in disorienting dilemmas, looking at the role of relationships, and understanding the importance of context and culture (Taylor, 2000). The focus of this research became understanding the potential of PLCs as contexts to support transformation.

Research Context

As the demographics of classroom contexts continue to shift to include greater diversity, many teachers experience challenges. Equity issues, such as the achievement gap, overrepresentation of certain groups in special education, and increased discipline referrals for different groups of students are continually at the forefront of educational conversations (Ladson-Billings, 2007). There is often a "cultural mismatch" as teachers walk into classrooms of students with different life experiences and cultures from their own (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004; Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Prospective teachers generally first encounter these

diverse classrooms in their field experiences, during which time they usually work with a field supervisor. The first author worked as a field supervisor for three years as a graduate student, and began having conversations with prospective teachers about issues of equity related to race, class, culture, language, gender, and sexual orientation within supervision conferences (Jacobs, 2007). This study expanded this work by recruiting fellow field supervisors interested in bringing equity issues to their practice. For this research, the first author[1] recruited the supervisor participants and served as the facilitator of the PLC. The second author served as a critical friend throughout the process and supported data analysis.

In order to recruit participants, an email was sent to all field supervisors in the Curriculum and Instruction Department in the College of Education at a southeastern research university. Potential participants had to be scheduled to supervise prospective teachers during the fall semester. The recruitment email specifically asked for field supervisors interested in finding ways to discuss issues of equity and diversity in their supervision work with prospective teachers. Equity issues were defined as relating to race, class, language, gender, and sexual orientation. Supervisors had to agree to attend eight two-hour sessions over a five-month period where they would engage in dialogue as well as build knowledge and skills related to equity issues and supervision.

At this research university, graduate students and adjunct professors compromise a majority of the field supervision. Thus out of the six supervisors who agreed to be in this study, there were five graduate students and one retired teacher/adjunct professor. They included five White females and one White male. Even though six supervisors participated in the study, the focus of this paper will be on three of the participants and their experiences within the learning community to illustrate the process of transformation. These three cases were specifically chosen for this paper because they illustrate distinctly different experiences and knowledge related to supervision and equity both before the study and throughout the study. Kevin, a 39-year-old White doctoral student in educational leadership, spent four years supervising prospective teachers at a rural, low-income elementary school. Kevin had a great deal of experience with supervision; however, he came to the PLC because he was inexperienced in thinking about equity issues and wanted to explore these ideas further. Veronica, a 46-year-old White doctoral student in curriculum and instruction, had over three years of experience as a field supervisor in a diverse, low-income elementary school. Veronica brought a dedication and theoretical understanding of equity, but came to the PLC because she struggled bringing her beliefs to supervision practice. Janice, a 64-year-old, White adjunct instructor and retired administrator, had three years of experience as a field supervisor in an upper-middle class, predominantly White elementary school. She came to the PLC having little experience with supervision or equity issues.

The supervisors came together for eight two-hour sessions over the fall semester. The first four sessions focused on building knowledge related to equity and

supervision, with topics such as identity, levels of reflection, deficit thinking, and supervision philosophy and strategies. Within the first four sessions, as the facilitator, I took more of a lead role by choosing the topics and readings for the sessions as well as planning specific activities. Activities involved engaging in role-playing scenarios, reading short articles, and doing reflective writing. For example, the supervisors mapped out the different areas of their identity and identified which ones strongly influenced their beliefs about teaching and supervision. After each activity and reading, the group engaged in discussion. I often posed the first question and then continued posing questions throughout the conversation, at times, to push the supervisors' thinking.

The supervisors also learned about a Coaching for Equity Cycle (Jacobs, 2007). This cycle of supervision follows the traditional clinical supervision steps of platform development, pre-observation conference, observation, and post-observation conference, but includes prompts at each step to help teachers recognize the inequities in schools, as well as those within their own teaching practices. For example, a supervisor might help a prospective teacher look for patterns in discipline related to the students' race or gender.

After these first four sessions, supervisors began to enact the Coaching for Equity Cycle with one of their prospective teachers. These cycles included one platform-development conference and three experiences observing the prospective teacher with a pre- and post-conference. Therefore, the focus of the second four sessions became about the supervisors sharing their experiences and challenges related to their work with the prospective teachers. At this time, they also provided advice and support to each other about these challenges. My role also changed in that I no longer dictated the content of the meetings, but simply provided the structure to support these conversations. I adapted several protocols from the National School Reform Faculty that allowed the supervisors to share their experiences, challenges, questions, etc. through framing questions, sharing a key moment, etc (National School Reform Faculty, 2009). The members then responded with questions and feedback. For example, a supervisor said, "When I met with my prospective teacher, she did not want to talk about students' culture, only about their reading ability. How do I get her to begin thinking more specifically about students' culture?" The other supervisors would then share advice and ideas related to that specific issue. During this time I acted as one of the participants by asking questions and sharing advice.

Throughout this article the supervisors' work together is referred to as a PLC. We acknowledge that simply bringing this group of field supervisors together did not necessarily create a PLC. However, they called themselves a learning community and worked on developing a shared practice, supporting each other through sharing and solving dilemmas, focusing on prospective teacher learning, and developing trusting relationships. These are all characteristics of PLCs as described in the literature and are seen illustrated in the findings section.

Research Methods

The purpose of this research was to study this PLC of field supervisors focused on bringing an equity lens to their supervision work with prospective teachers and to understand the process of transformation that occurred. Grounded in interpretivism (Patton, 2002), this qualitative study used a constructivist theoretical framework. The main research question was: *How do supervisors make meaning of their experience within a professional learning community focused on cultivating equity-oriented supervision?* The focus of this paper is on one of the research subquestions: *How do the supervisors describe the process of their pedagogical transformation?*

The main source of data collected was the audiotaped conversations from all eight learning community sessions. After each meeting, the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim so initial analysis of that learning community session could be shared with the supervisors for fifteen minutes at the beginning of the next meeting for member checking. A second source of data included a journal entry written by the field supervisors after each session. Supervisors wrote approximately 2-3 pages about what they learned, what influenced their learning, and what ideas challenged them. Finally, I kept a researcher's journal to reflect on my role as a facilitator and on the dialogue during the meetings.

Data was analyzed using Hatch's (2002) political analysis, a method arguing that researchers can never eliminate their bias or beliefs from research; so it is better to be upfront before analysis as well as acknowledging research as a political act. Initial analysis included codes such as: *change, frame of reference, tensions, stories, and complexity*. This initial coding was followed by secondary coding identifying the complexity and nuances of the initial codes. For example, in Session 5 one of the major codes was *self-reflection*. Under self-reflection, the secondary codes that described this self-reflection were: *question origin of beliefs, feeling responsibility, previous practice*, and *naming pedagogy*. After secondary coding, I connected codes to write emerging generalizations. For example, "*Self-reflection involves exploring tensions related to previous experiences.*" To support the trustworthiness of this analysis, I debriefed and looked over the data with a critical friend (second author) throughout the analysis process. I also shared these emerging generalizations with the supervisors through member checking at the beginning of each learning community session. At times this member checking resulted in negotiating, adapting, or refining the generalizations

A second level of analysis occurred after all sessions were complete and focused on the transformation process across all sessions. New coding looked across all sessions rather than the individual sessions from the first level of analysis. Generalizations were once again written, but we were looking for the nuances and complexity of the process throughout all eight meetings. The commonalities that emerged across the process included terms such as *relationships, dilemmas, modeling, and reframing*. After we had named these concepts, a visual model was created to illustrate the complexity of the interplay between these concepts. The

findings of this paper are connected to the process of transformation that occurred across the learning community sessions.

Findings

Each field supervisor came to the PLC with different knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to supervision and equity; therefore, his or her transformation was unique. Kevin's transformation involved coming to terms with his discomfort and resistance with talking to prospective teachers about race. Kevin engaged in self-reflection about his knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to equity and how his previous experiences influenced his current thinking about equity. Veronica began to move toward putting her beliefs about equity into practice as a supervisor. Throughout the process she questioned her positioning as a supervisor, the personal responsibility she felt for prospective teacher welfare, and her fear of resistance. Janice struggled trying to reconcile her previous experience with supervision as an administrator, where she relied on hierarchical models. The major transformation that occurred for Janice was moving from a more traditional, hierarchical way of thinking about supervision to a more egalitarian view of supervision. Even though Janice did not spend as much time as other PLC members prompting her prospective teacher about issues of equity, the equity work with her interns began by adjusting her own supervision pedagogy to reflect her belief that the prospective teacher's voice should not be marginalized. Transformation for these supervisors occurred over time throughout their time in the PLC. Also, transformation was definitely not a finished process. With adapted frames of reference they continue to change and grow.

Even though the field supervisors' transformations were unique, similarities are found within the process of how this transformation occurred. In other words, even though the *what* of transformation may differ, the *how* or process of Kevin's, Veronica's, and Janice's process of transformation within the context of this PLC was quite similar. The concepts that emerged central to the supervisors' process of transformation included multiple levels of dilemmas and dialogic tools for promoting critical reflection. The interconnection of these dilemmas and dialogic tools illustrates the prominence of collaborative inquiry in the process of transformation.

Experiencing Multiple Levels of Dilemmas

Mezirow (2000) discusses transformation as beginning with a disorienting dilemma that may be sudden or occur over time. Dilemmas played a prominent role in the supervisors' transformation throughout the PLC meetings. The dilemmas that field supervisors experienced were not just about the practice or "how to" of equity-centered supervision, but included dilemmas that were personally related to their identity and dilemmas related to the larger societal context. These multiple *dilemmas of self, dilemmas of practice,* and *dilemmas of social responsibility* (see

Table 1) focused supervisors not just on the means of supervision but on the ends of supervision as well (Servage, 2008).

Supervisors experienced *dilemmas of self* as they began engaging in self-reflection about where their frames of reference or beliefs originated. These dilemmas of self occurred as field supervisors reflected on their identity and life histories for clues about who they were, how they came to be that person, and how their identity influenced their supervision. For example, Kevin looked to his family background as one of the origins for his discomfort with engaging prospective teachers in equity conversations. He shared that he was taught in his family to respect the ideas of others. Critically questioning another person to reframe and possibly question their beliefs would have been viewed as rude in Kevin's family. Janice reflected on the influence of being a teacher during an era of hierarchical, top-down supervision practice, as opposed to a teacher-growth-oriented process, as limiting her views of supervision. Similarly, when talking about authority and the role of the supervisor, Veronica reflected on her prior experiences as a woman. She shared, "as a woman I never have really seen myself in a position of authority, in a position of certainty, in a position of power." In each of these cases, the supervisors looked within themselves to critically reflect on the origins

Table 1
Classification of Dilemmas

Dilemma Classifications	Types of Dilemmas	Description
Dilemmas of Self	Examining own identity	Experiencing dilemmas about who you are and what you believe
	Examining origin of assumptions	Experiencing dilemmas about why you believe what you believe. Looking to family background, experiences in education, gender, etc.
Dilemmas of Practice	Examining previous practice	Experiencing dilemmas generated by prior experiences with supervision or other practices
	Examining current practice	Experiencing new dilemmas while completing Coaching for Equity cycles or new practices
Dilemmas of Social Responsibility	Examining the connection to society	Experiencing dilemmas about how personal practice is connected to larger societal issues.
	Examining feelings of greater responsibility to society	Experiencing dilemmas about enacting practice in a way that makes a difference in the larger society

and assumptions behind their way of framing the world and specifically equity-centered supervision.

In contrast to dilemmas of self, which emerged from the supervisor's personal life and identity, *dilemmas of practice* emerged from the learning community members' experiences as a supervisor. In the early PLC sessions, when the supervisors had not yet begun Coaching for Equity, these dilemmas of practice focused on previous experience as a supervisor. In essence, these dilemmas were a part of their supervision baggage. For example, Kevin believed that he was not very self-reflective about his supervision practice and wished to change after he witnessed the other supervisors' critical self-reflection. Veronica shared her struggle to put her beliefs and knowledge about equity into practice. Janice discussed her concern about talking too much during supervision conferences and her desire to alter the roles that the prospective teacher and supervisor typically played within her supervision practice. Each of these dilemmas of practice received collective attention from the learning community during the learning community work.

After the supervisors began Coaching for Equity, new dilemmas of practice surfaced related to their actual work with prospective teachers. Over the course of the PLC meetings, the supervisors' dilemmas of practice evolved and deepened. As opposed to the initial dilemmas that were much more technical, these new tensions often appeared more conceptual and often political. For example, Veronica asked the question, "How do we help prospective teachers feel that their identity is not being threatened through the process of looking at equity issues?" Janice began to question the practice of supervision currently being used within the teacher education program in light of her new thinking about supervision with an equity lens. "I'm having to fill out boxes that aren't really the critical issues any longer. That's not really what we need to be at looking at." Kevin questioned, "How are we going to help them [prospective teachers] see the importance of equity for the special education child if it's so foreign to what their beliefs are now?"

Finally, supervisors experienced *dilemmas of social responsibility*. These dilemmas moved supervisors beyond themselves and the context of supervision to the larger societal context. For example, Kevin asked, "Do our efforts in education to name the needs and backgrounds of students cause us to consider those things before we think about the individual needs? Am I perpetuating stereotypes?" Veronica questioned how she was enacting her work and the impact on the larger society. "If these ideas are to take hold and move further out into the world and make change, we have no other choice but to get it [supervision] right." These dilemmas focused not just on the specific context where these supervisors' work took place, but uncovered core concepts that extended to the larger society.

Dilemmas became the foundation for the discourse within the learning community. Experiencing dilemmas and feeling dissonance at multiple levels were a common element associated with the supervisors' process of transformation. Since the supervisors were at various levels in their understandings about supervision

and equity, they each experienced dilemmas relevant to where they were on their journey. While these dilemmas became the content for the learning community work, the discourse within the learning community promoted critical reflection about these dilemmas.

Using Dialogic Tools to Promote Critical Reflection

The supervisors often shared the multiple levels of dilemmas they were experiencing through the telling of stories, which became one of the key texts in the PLC. Just listening to the stories of other group members did not mean that field supervisors transformed their thinking. The supervisors critically reflected on these stories and engaged in discourse around these stories. Just engaging in critical reflection did not mean that transformative learning was taking place, however, critical reflection was a necessary condition for this transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Several dialogic tools naturally emerged within the discourse of the PLC that promoted critical reflection around these dilemmas related to equity-centered supervision. These tools included: *modeling, probing,* and *reframing*.

Modeling was a tool used within the PLC that served to scaffold the supervisors' understanding of and ability to engage in critical reflection. Since there were varying levels of expertise within the community, those supervisors with more experience thinking about equity and/or supervision issues as well as engaging in critical reflection could model a critically reflective thinking for each other. Modeling became a way that community members could make their reflective process explicit to each other.

For example, Kevin shared that one of the reasons he began examining his previous life's journey and its influence on his experience Coaching for Equity was due to the fact that other PLC members modeled critical self-reflection. "I think other people reflecting on their self-awareness makes me reflect more on where I am. It helps me do a better job of holding up the mirror to myself." Veronica began to share how her thinking about equity had been part of a long journey, starting with a critical pedagogy class 13 years earlier. From this, Kevin began a similar self-reflection about his journey.

> When Veronica was talking about the critical pedagogy class she took in '93, I thought that my background over the last almost decade has been in educational leadership and how equity is defined there. I'm wondering if that's sort of the foundation for my view of equity as more black or white because that's what has been preached in the majority of my classes. As opposed to her [Veronica's] background, [which] has been more one of reflecting and thinking about children.

Kevin regarded the critical self-reflection modeled by others, especially those who were more evolved in their thinking about equity, as being highly influential in his ability to move forward with his own supervision.

Additionally, the explicit modeling helped some of the group members begin to develop meta-cognitive, critically reflective prompts, which they used when they took their practice back to the field. For example, Kevin shared this:

> Veronica has posed a lot of questions that have really made me stop and think, "Where am I really on this?" You know, because she's very evolved. She's said a lot of things which have made me focus in and think, "Where am I on this? Why am I here on this? Why I am not here on this? What do I need to do?, and Where do I need to go next?"

These questions helped Kevin develop his own repertoire of questions that prompted and facilitated his critical reflection about equity issues.

Probing consisted of supervisors asking other PLC members questions as a way to push their thinking toward greater critical reflection. For example, in a discussion about the difference between a supervisor and a coach, Kevin shared that he saw a coach as someone to "move you toward that goal of being the best player that you can be" and contrasted this with a supervisor whose "role is to pigeon hole and tell you this is where you are." In response to Kevin, the other group members posed questions, probing him to think more critically about the idea he shared. Veronica said, "And you don't think a supervisor can do that?" Janice shared, "Wouldn't a supervisor say that he or she was trying to help you be the best teacher you could be?" Finally another supervisor probed, "Can't a coach also tell you that you don't know what you're doing?" All of these probing questions helped problematize Kevin's initial definitions of coach and supervisor. This could lead him toward rethinking his frame of reference and transforming his initial definition.

Probing used within the discourse of the PLC helped to push the supervisors' inquiries to deeper levels of reflection as well as pushed them to question existing frames of reference. For example, Janice reflected:

> It was brought home to me, when another supervisor in the group questioned what I was saying, how I was operating on assumptions I had made after reading the vignette. I will now try to approach situations by asking questions to clarify or elaborate rather than simply assuming.

Questioning through probing can an important tool within the process of transformation.

Finally, the supervisors used *reframing* to help each other engage in critical reflection and look at their dilemmas and frames of reference from alternative perspectives. For example, when Kevin experienced a dilemma over whether he was stereotyping by bringing up labels such as race, class, and ethnicity, Veronica reframed Kevin's dilemma using a critically reflective way of thinking. Using the concept of colorblindness and larger structural inequities in society, she shared how she would think about and address this issue in her own practice:

> It's good to deal with people as individuals, but in some ways dealing with kids

> as individuals allows you to negate the issues of race that are bigger than the kids—the institutional issues. The life that a child who is Black will live compared to the life that a child who is White will live. And if we treat everybody as an individual, then in some ways we're not doing them justice. We're not acknowledging those institutional levels where some of this stuff happens. The world is not colorblind. The world is not blind to people who have more money and people who have less money. And if we try to make the school this place where that's not acknowledged, then we are devaluing the life of a lot of those kids that walk in those doors every day.

Reframing also occurred when Kevin brought a dilemma of practice related to engaging in a discussion with two of his prospective teachers about their attitude toward the African American boys in their classroom. Kevin was concerned that by talking about race explicitly he would face immediate resistance. Veronica then helped him with several ways to frame his response to the prospective teachers:

> You can frame it in different ways. You may not ever be able to approach the issue of racism with a student. They might not be ready to go there, and that's your professional decision in a lot of ways based on your relationship with that person. But you could encourage them to try to because time and time again people will tell you that the student in your class that irritates you the most is the one you should really get to know. Number one. Number two, you could approach, "Okay, how are we going to help him be successful!" How do you think he learns? You've got to plant the seeds and approaching it at multi- different levels.

Reframing also supported Veronica's critical reflection after she shared a dilemma of practice about pushing a prospective teacher too far in conversations about equity. Another supervisor helped Veronica reframe this dilemma by suggesting she use the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as a way to frame Coaching for Equity. Veronica then critically reflected on this idea and shared how the zone of proximal development could definitely work as a way of framing her supervision practice.

> I think you're mention of ZPD is a great way to look at it [Coaching for Equity], because it's really that tension between giving them [prospective teachers] what they need to develop as a teacher and pushing them in areas related to equity and social justice. You must find a balance, that's so important.

Being able to engage in a discourse that is critically reflective involves an adult learner who not only engages in critical self-reflection, but is able to assess the assumptions, expectations, and values of others as well (Mezirow, 2003). Clearly, looking at how to foster critical reflection within a PLC becomes important if transformation is the goal.

Transformation as Collaborative Inquiry

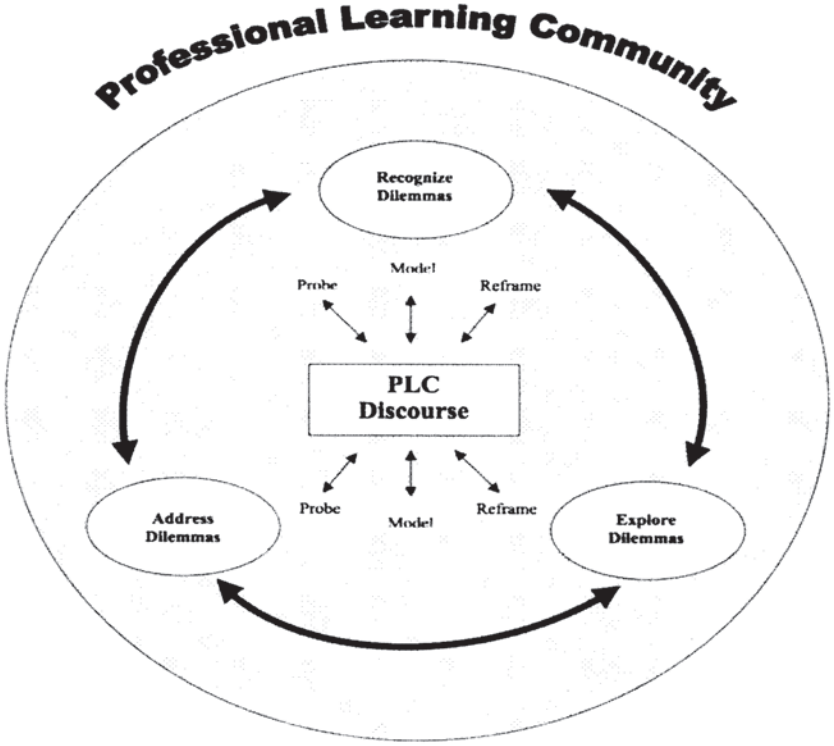
Kevin, Veronica, and Janice experienced multiple levels of dilemmas and engaged in critical reflection about these dilemmas as the PLC members used the

dialogic tools of probing, modeling, and reframing within the discourse of the learning community. For these supervisors, developing equity-centered supervision pedagogy became a continual process of inquiry. Since this inquiry was so highly influenced by the PLC members through discourse with one another, this inquiry was collaborative. Transformation occurred through a continual process of collaborative inquiry within the PLC. Transformation was not a *fait accompli* for these supervisors, but ongoing. The continuous cycle of collaborative inquiry illustrates this ongoing transformation.

Even though each supervisor came to the PLC with unique knowledge and experiences related to equity and supervision, and therefore different dilemmas, this process of inquiry was very similar across supervisors. The collaborative inquiry process followed a cycle of *recognizing* a dilemma, *exploring* a dilemma, and *addressing* a dilemma. Transformation occurred for these supervisors through this collaborative inquiry cycle. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Collaborative Inquiry



As presented in Figure 1, through the multidirectional arrows, this process of inquiry was complex and multidimensional and therefore did not always move in a clockwise direction. For example, often after beginning to explore a dilemma, the supervisor began to recognize additional dilemmas. Also, after engaging in action, a supervisor might recognize new dilemmas not previously noticed or take a step back and engage in further exploration. Often this multi-directionality was greatly impacted by the PLC discourse. As seen in Figure 1, inquiry was not simply an individual process, but a collaborative one through the context of the PLC. The supervisors' inquiries were embedded within the PLC. The PLC fostered collaborative inquiry as they collectively supported each other within their inquiries by prompting greater critical reflection and moving the inquiry process forward. As seen in Figure 1, recognizing a dilemma was s not simply an individual process but a group one. By engaging in modeling, probing, and reframing the PLC supports the recognition of dilemmas. Exploring dilemmas became a process of critical reflection as the PLC members once again utilized the dialogic tools. Finally, even when selecting a course of action and deciding on critical moments to act, the PLC influenced the depth and course of this action. Therefore, the PLC and individual supervisors were intertwined throughout the process of inquiry as they transformed their pedagogy. Transformation as collaborative inquiry can be seen in Kevin's story.

For Kevin, the process of inquiry began as he *recognized* a dilemma of social responsibility over using labels such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity when discussing equity issues. Kevin framed this dilemma, "Do our efforts in education to name the needs and backgrounds cause us to consider those things before we think about the individual needs?" This dilemma came about through his own experience with Coaching for Equity as well as his critically reflecting on the other supervisors' stories. Next, Kevin began *exploring* this dilemma by first engaging in critical self-refection as a dilemma of self about the possible origins of his discomfort and his line of thinking related to stereotyping. Then through the use of modeling, probing, and reframing, the PLC engaged Kevin in critical discourse that would influence the path of his transformation. For example, Veronica prompted Kevin to reframe his concern with using labels such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity from being a negative position to being a positive position that acknowledged rather than ignored how people are treated differently by society.

After Kevin had explored his dilemma over time, a critical incident occurred that prompted him to begin *acting on* his dilemma of social responsibility. This occurred as Kevin brought the dilemma of practice about how two prospective teachers were talking about and responding to the African American boys in their classroom. Even though Kevin had engaged in transformation to be able to see how equity could fit into his practice, he was not yet ready to make a change or act. Kevin then asked the PLC to help him figure out how to act on his dilemma. The group modeled questions Kevin could ask and ways to frame the discussion to promote

success rather than simply focus on race. This second layer of collaboration within the inquiry process supported Kevin's move toward transformative action that he may not have been able to do on his own.

After Kevin acted on his dilemma, he returned to the group and shared how he enacted the equity conversations with the prospective teachers. Even though the supervisors transformed in unique ways, the process of transformation as collaborative inquiry was similar across the supervisors.

Implications of Transformation in a PLC

Transformation within this PLC included attention to multiple levels of dilemmas and the use of dialogic tools to foster critical reflection. The interconnectedness of these elements fostered a process of collaborative inquiry that prompted transformation. These elements and their interaction within this particular PLC have implications for developing and fostering transformative PLCs.

If the key elements of transformation within a PLC include sharing multiple levels of dilemmas and pushing other members toward critical reflection, then a foundation of PLC work must be the creation of safe context for discourse. Within their written reflections and discussions during the PLC meetings, the supervisors identified their relationships as fostering a safe space for their learning, which allowed them to inquire into their practice. For example, Veronica shared in the community that, after realizing the other group members would honor her ideas and treat them with respect, she was able to make herself vulnerable and share her dilemmas. "I think it's important to be able to share whatever it is that you're thinking. I think that's a huge thing to understand; it's going to be safe." Several of the supervisors talked about how they could anticipate the support from the group as they experienced dilemmas within their practice. "People genuinely listen, care, and want to help. I knew before even coming to the meeting that people would help me with my dilemma." When participants are members of a community, they may be more willing to take risks, ask hard questions, or try something new because they feel safe and know they have the support of the community (Wenger et al., 2002). Time to develop these relationships must be taken into account when thinking about the transformative potential of a community.

Wenger (1998) speaks of the balance between fostering community and collegiality within communities of practice. PLCs are often characterized in the literature using descriptors related to consensus and community (Achinstein, 2002; Wood, 2007). However, PLCs cannot just be about congenial conversations and safety; there must be a balance between challenge and agreement, success and failure, and discord and peace. Relationships need to be attended to and fostered; however, as shown in this study, there is also the need for critical reflection and critical inquiry occurring within the dialogue.

Within the PLC, there must be attention to the levels at which the members are

experiencing dilemmas and dissonance. PLCs must provide the space and flexibility to allow members' dilemmas to take precedence as the content and focus of the discourse. In order to move toward multiple levels of dilemmas the facilitator may need to deliberately use the dialogic tools and frame questions to promote greater critical reflection. Another way is for the PLC to explicitly talk about and assess the levels of dilemmas present in their dialogue.

After analyzing the dialogue within this particular PLC, the dialogic tools of modeling, probing, and reframing emerged as being important for critical reflection. PLCs must be deliberate about including these tools within the dialogue. A facilitator can model these tools for the PLC. Also, the PLC can have explicit conversations to define the tools and analyze their dialogue for the presence of these tools. Each individual PLC can explore the possibility of using other dialogic tools that support the development of critical reflection. Part of this may be listening to tapes of conversation to answer the question, How do we make our work more critical?

An unanticipated thread that emerged within this PLC was the role that inquiry played in supervisor transformation. Thinking about PLCs as contexts that foster collaborative inquiry and become vehicles for moving inquiry to a much deeper level has important implications. Collaborative inquiry does not mean that everyone within a PLC must have the same dilemma, but that the PLC context is there to prompt fellow community members to think more deeply about their dilemmas. When the inquiry process is only an individual experience, transformation can only go so far. There are limitations based on the knowledge and skills of the person asking the inquiry question. This study shows that when inquiry is conducted within a collaborative context, such as a PLC, the group collaboration provides additional supports that promote critical reflection and transformation.

PLCs provide a context for members to share, explore, and engage in discourse about dilemmas they face. By making the inquiry public within the learning community, participants have access to dialogic tools that can potentially move their inquiries to a deeper level. Also, by gaining support and guidance from the PLC, inquiry can move from simply transformative learning to transformative action. PLCs that meet over time can become contexts that propel transformation forward beyond simply changing or adapting a frame of reference, but changing how one acts on and acts within the world.

Note

[1] Throughout the remainder of the paper, "I" will be used to refer to the first author.

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