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A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning[☆]

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Abstract

After an overview of the characteristics of professional learning communities (PLCs), this manuscript presents a review of 10 American studies and one English study on the impact of PLCs on teaching practices and student learning. Although, few studies move beyond self-reports of positive impact, a small number of empirical studies explore the impact on teaching practice and student learning. The collective results of these studies suggest that well-developed PLCs have positive impact on both teaching practice and student achievement. Implications of this research and suggestions for next steps in the efforts to document in ~~the~~ **document**

extol the virtues of learning communities as an essential way to organize schools in order to maximize time spent in professional development (e.g. Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Louis & Marks, 1998), only recently has the focus of this literature shifted to examining empirically the changes in teachers' practices and students' learning as a result of PLCs. Although, teachers' perceptions about the value of PLCs are both vaaand,otTtnk <</MCID 8 >>BDC 0 0 0.4 rg /T1_1 1 Tf s T

laments the fact that all combinations of individuals with any interest in schools are now calling themselves PLCs. Everyone from grade level teams to state departments of education is framing their work in terms of PLCs. Yet, using the term PLC does not demonstrate that a learning community does, in fact, exist. DuFour (2004) cautions, “the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (para 2). In order to prevent the PLC model from the same dismal fate as other well intentioned reform efforts, DuFour (2004) recommends that educators continually reflect on the ways they are working to embed student learning and teacher collaboration into the culture of the schools. Ultimately, however, educators must critically examine the results of their efforts in terms of student achievement. To demonstrate results, PLCs must be able to articulate their outcomes in terms of data that indicate changed teaching practices and improved student learning, something they have not yet established as common practice. With these two outcomes as our focus, we now turn to an examination of the empirical literature that attempts to document these vital results.

3. Parameters for the review of the research

The studies for our review come from two key sources. First, we searched the US research and publications links on the websites of organizations that are at the forefront of work with school-based learning communities. Specifically, we searched the websites of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the National School Reform Faculty, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Our second source of literature comes from searches on both ERIC and EBSCO databases for articles published between 1990 and 2005. Because of the nebulous terminology associated with PLCs, several search terms were used. These included the following: PLCs, teacher community, teachers and learning communities, critical friends groups, communities of practice, and then communities of practice with qualifiers that included: and teachers, and schools, and student achievement. The results of this search, although by no means exhaustive, produced 55 books, papers, and articles that included some efforts to connect learning communities with teaching practice and/or student achievement. In selecting material for this literature review, we decided to

limit the review to published articles or book chapters that included data about the impact of school-based PLCs on teaching practice and/or student learning. Using these parameters the search provided only 10 empirical studies of the work of teachers in learning communities. In addition, we decided to include one large multi-site research report commissioned and published by the General Teaching Council of England, Department for Education and Skills. Although not refereed and published in an edited journal, this report conducted by faculty at the Universities of Bristol, Bath and London has been vetted and published by the Department for Education and Skills in England. These 11 studies are the focus of our analysis. The other 44 books or articles provided non-empirical multi-site

between participation in a learning community and teachers' classroom practices. As a way of organizing this part of our review, we will focus on our guiding questions: In what ways does teaching practice change as a result of participation in a PLC? And, what aspects of the PLC support these changes?

In a general sense, all 11 research articles used in this analysis supported the idea that participation in a learning community leads to changes in teaching practice. Because of this, it is imperative that we look more closely at the ways in which PLCs support these changes.

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(2005) demonstrated that the mobilization of leadership within strong PLCs enabled faculties and administrators to develop innovative strategies for use of financial and personnel resources to increase student learning and the strength of the professional learning context.

5.4. Continuous teacher learning

The final element of PLCs that supports overall changes in teaching cultures is that of continuous teacher learning. Participation in learning communities facilitates professional development that is driven by the needs of teachers as they are naturally engaged in efforts to accomplish their goals. The importance of continuous teacher learning was supported throughout the reviewed literature (Berry et al., 2005; Bolam et al., 2005; Englert and Tarrant, 1995; Hollins et al., 2004; Phillips, 2003; Supovitz, 2002). More specifically, Hollins et al. (2004) documented that teachers involved in efforts to improve literacy in African-American students sought out scholarly literature on culturally relevant teaching.

pedagogy. Finally, in the case study by Phillips (2003), interview data indicated that the teachers in this middle school continually analyzed data from each child to identify ways to affect his/her success both cognitively and affectively. Phillips concluded that the teachers “knew their students’ population well, and they deliberately created culturally relevant programs to make learning more meaningful” (p. 258). In the long run, the data across these studies indicated that a key element of successful PLCs is their pervasive attention to meeting the learning needs of their students.

7. Summary

The use of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means to improve teaching practice and student achievement is a move that educators support and value, as indicated by teachers’ perceptions of impact as cited in this review. There is also some limited evidence that the impact is measurable beyond teacher perceptions. To summarize the findings across the reviewed literature in terms of our two initial research questions: (1) participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered. In addition, teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning; (2) when teachers participate in a learning community, students benefit as well, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time. All six studies reporting student learning outcomes indicated that an intense focus on student learning and achievement was the aspect of learning communities that impacted student learning. Together, these findings from the literature provide

Teachers working within PLCs need to develop collaborative relationships with researchers to help document the impact of their efforts. Although, the number of studies reviewed here was not high, what we found was encouraging. Clearly future research must continue building evidence that supports the impact of PLCs on teaching practice and achievement.

The studies that formed the basis of this analysis were mainly qualitative, although some of them added quantitative data in the form of survey results or students' standardized test results. Two
