



Professional development at the local level: Necessary and sufficient conditions for critical collegueship



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Investigation of conditions associated with teachers' in-depth discussions.
- Focus on teacher communities of inquiry in a professional development initiative.
- Using unique methodological approach: Qualitative Comparative Analysis.
- Single purpose was a necessary condition associated with in-depth discussion.
- Coach questions and connecting theory and practice were also associated conditions.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines factors that contributed to critical conversations in teacher communities of inquiry (CI) as part of a statewide professional development initiative in the United States. Based on a three-year mixed method design, we use qualitative comparative analysis to investigate the influence of combinations of conditions on the depth of discussion. Results suggest that there were three conditions associated with the extent to which CI members engaged in discussions with substantive interaction and reflection: a clear purpose, coach questioning, and the connection of theory to practice. The findings contribute to the understanding of effective reform implementation in different contexts.

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1. Introduction

High quality teacher professional development (PD) has the potential to promote: increased student achievement (e.g., Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005), high-quality schools (e.g., Borko & Putnam, 1995; Desimone, 2009; Talbert, McLaughlin, Rowan, 1993), and effective policy implementation (McIntyre & Kyle, 2006). Research conducted in the United States, however, shows that the quality and effectiveness of PD programs vary considerably (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). Many efforts to promote teacher learning have been inconsistent or ineffective (Coburn, 2001; McLaughlin, 1991) and reforms often fall

short of providing meaningful PD that promotes change (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Thus, there is a need for increased understanding of how PD supports teacher learning and instructional practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Education Week Research Center, 2014).

Heeding this need, in the past two decades, there has been increased attention to how different forms of PD can improve classroom instruction and student learning (e.g., Avalos, 2011; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Taylor & Colet, 2010). Many recommendations include PD in the form of collaborative teacher learning in teacher communities (e.g., Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Louis & Marks, 1998; Skerrett, 2010; van Es, 2012). While there is consensus emerging on the factors of high quality PD, there are still many different approaches to school-based Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs).

Research suggests that one way to improve design, implementation, and evaluation of TLCs is through a deeper

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understanding of the different configurations of TLCs that promote teacher learning (e.g., see Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) found that well-developed TLCs had a positive impact on both teaching practice and student learning. In addition, research on the combination of learning conditions in TLCs can enhance understanding about how teachers learn best in local settings (Cobb, McCain, de Silva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003).

To address these needs, we adopted a configurational approach (Ragin, 2008; 2014) to examine factors that contribute to the types of talk that support teacher learning in TLCs (e.g., see Lord, 1994; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). We conducted a three-year, mixed method study of teachers involved in Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME), a PD program that was designed and initiated by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to support teachers' collaborative learning about formative assessment (FA). Because FAME was enacted through TLCs, it provided an ideal opportunity to examine factors that influenced discussions in a specific reform initiative designed to promote teacher learning about instructional practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Formative assessment as knowledge and practice

Formative assessment (a.k.a. assessment for learning; Wiliam, 2011) is a teaching practice that informs both instruction and student learning (Bell & Cowie, 2001). Formative assessment is a process that uses students' ideas to guide both teaching and learning (CCSSO, 2008). It helps teachers be more reflective about students' understandings (Furtak, 2012) and more likely to support students in identifying barriers to learning (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). The use of FA can improve student learning (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998) and student involvement (e.g., Brookhart, 2013). However, learning about and enacting FA is complex for teachers, because they need to develop multifaceted knowledge and practice embedded in teaching and learning. Thus, professional development about FA has been proposed to help teachers learn and improve in this practice (e.g., Popham, 2009; Schneider & Randel, 2009).

2.2. Effective professional development and Teacher Learning Communities

Researchers have begun to illustrate connections among the design of PD, teachers' learning, and subsequent changes in classroom practice (e.g. Borko, 2004; Wilson, 2013). There is growing evidence that effective PD should address aspects of school capacity (King, 2002; Newmann, King, & Youngs; 2000); persist over a long period (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010); ensconce teachers in supportive communities of practice (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006; Wenger, 1998); align with teacher, school, and district goals for student learning (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007); and engage teachers in authentic problems (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Webster-Wright, 2009; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Teacher learning communities are one form of PD that provide opportunities for learning by facilitating collaborative work (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001) and promote collaborative inquiry (Nelson et al., 2008). Two assumptions justify the use of TLCs: (1) knowledge is situated in teachers' practical experiences and understood by critical and collective reflection, and (2) active participation in this process is related to increased knowledge and students' learning (Vescio et al., 2008).

Although TLCs have the potential to promote and sustain

learning, further evidence is needed to uncover why some TLCs are more successful than others. There is a large difference between a group of teachers sitting in a room for a meeting and teachers engaged in critical inquiry to further their professional growth. Some argue that effective TLCs benefit from a specific content focus and location (e.g., Slavit, Nelson, & Kennedy, 2010) and be led by experts (e.g., Stein, Smith, & Silver, 1999). Others suggest that inter-school TLCs can be effective (e.g., Richmond & Manokore, 2011) and that leadership should be distributed among the TLCs members (Stoll et al., 2006). Further research has found that the role of a coach was a critical factor in supporting a TLC (Grossman et al., 2001; Richmond & Manokore, 2011; Stein et al., 1999). In terms of composition, TLC diversity (accompanied with facilitation) can enrich discussion when problems of practice are raised and discussed from different perspectives (Slavit, Laurence, Kennedy & Holmund-Nelson, 2009; Thomas, Wineburg, Grossman, Myhre, & Woolworth, 1998).

2.3. Communities of inquiry

Levine (2010) clarified affordances of different conceptions of TLCs. Teacher communities have been referred to as, among others, instructional communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Supovitz, 2002) and professional learning communities (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). For the purposes of our study, we will use the term "communities of inquiry" (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Curry, 2008) to characterize the type of collaborative format and the nature of the teacher learning intended in the FAME PD program. Although the empirical realities of the cases in this study vary from this ideal, the construct of communities of inquiry (CIs) provides a conceptual and analytic lens to examine the nature of discussion within TLCs.

In CIs, teachers come together to problematize common practices and underlying assumptions, often through consideration of extant practices and student work. In formal instances, teachers participate in a "cycle of inquiry" in which "teacher researchers go through recursive stages of formulating problems, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and planning for action" (Levine, 2010, p.112). The mechanism for learning embedded in CIs is straightforward—participating teachers learn through focused investigation and challenging of extant practices and beliefs. The importance of critical reflection in CIs has been illustrated in several studies. Wilson and Berne (1999) suggest that productive CIs must focus on building "trust and community while aiming for a professional discourse that includes and does not avoid critique" (p. 195). By challenging implicit assumptions and questioning axiomatic practices, CI discussions can lead to changes in practice (Antonacopoulou, 2004; Boud & Walker, 1998; Brockbank, McGill, & Beech, 2002; Brookfield, 2005; Katz, Sutherland, & Earl, 2005).

Similarly, Lord (1994) suggests that to support teachers in changing their practice, PD should allow teachers to ask questions about the practice of teaching and reflect on their own practice. However, just asking questions and reflection may not be enough to promote teacher change:

[f]or a broader transformation, collegiality will need to support a critical stance toward teaching. This means more than simply sharing ideas or supporting one's colleagues in the change process. It means confronting traditional practice – the teacher's own and that of his or her colleagues – with an eye toward wholesale revision (p. 192).

This idea of *critical colleagueship* (Lord, 1994) is an essential part of CIs that is often difficult to attain because these critical interactions may be against the personal and "experiential" nature of

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