



# Tensions in equity- and reform-oriented learning in teachers' collaborative conversations



Nicole L. Louie <sup>1</sup>

University of California, Berkeley, USA

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Collaborative conversations in a reform-oriented teacher work group were analyzed.
- Even reform-oriented teachers may routinely reproduce traditional discourses.
- Traditional framings of collegial interaction obstruct teacher learning for equity.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 23 June 2015  
Received in revised form  
30 September 2015  
Accepted 2 October 2015  
Available online xxx

### Keywords:

Communities of practice  
Mathematics education  
Educational change  
Discourse analysis

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how teachers' collaborative conversations afford and constrain their learning opportunities, through the close analysis of an interaction between equity-oriented mathematics teachers who were working together. The analysis reveals that although the group seemed like an ideal professional learning community in many ways, the teachers were frequently caught in tensions between restrictive and inclusive discourses about mathematical competence. The existence of these tensions presented opportunities for the teachers to learn, but teachers' framings of their own collaborative work stifled these opportunities. This paper contributes to understanding the challenges of equity- and reform-oriented learning in teachers' professional communities.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

International evidence shows that collective participation in professional learning communities can lead to improvements in professional culture, classroom practice, and student achievement (Louis & Marks, 1998; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). This potential has made professional learning communities a “hot topic” in many countries (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 221), and a number of jurisdictions have gone so far as to mandate professional learning communities in schools (Horn & Kane, 2015).

But all professional communities are not created equal. Decades of research have worked to identify the characteristics of communities that support the kind of teacher learning that in turn

supports robust and equitable student learning (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Little, 1987; Vescio et al., 2008). In one of the earliest studies of workplace culture in schools, Little (1982) found that norms in many schools discouraged interaction between teachers, whereas schools that were “conducive to continued ‘learning on the job’” and high student achievement maintained norms of frequent interaction. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) later showed that even strong communities of practice, in which teachers collaborate regularly on instruction, may be fundamentally conservative, maintaining traditional routines and attributing poor performance to student deficiencies that cannot be affected by instruction. And as Little and Horn's (Horn, 2007; Horn & Little, 2010; Little, 1990, 2003) analyses of collegial conversations have demonstrated, work groups that are convened with the express purpose of supporting equity- and reform-oriented teacher learning may still close down opportunities for learning. Teachers may dismiss problems of practice as normal or inevitable, or render problems and their solutions in generic terms that leave actual classroom practice opaque. A small number of groups instead open up problems of practice for collective interpretation and inquiry.

<sup>1</sup> E-mail address: [nllouie@utep.edu](mailto:nllouie@utep.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Nicole L. Louie is currently an assistant professor of mathematics education at the University of Texas at El Paso. Please address correspondence to her there: 500 West University Avenue, College of Education Rm. 603, El Paso, TX 79968, United States of America, or email [nllouie@utep.edu](mailto:nllouie@utep.edu).

This article extends understandings of teacher learning communities through close examination of teacher–teacher interaction, asking *How do teachers' collaborative conversations afford and constrain teachers' opportunities to learn?* Following previous research on teachers' opportunities to learn through interaction (Dobie & Anderson, 2015; Horn & Kane, 2015; Little, 2003), I do not make claims here about effects on individuals' actual learning. Rather, I examine conversational affordances for teacher learning, in particular, opportunities for teachers to negotiate equity- and reform-oriented understandings of mathematics, students, and their own collective work. An opportunity is not a guarantee of learning, but it is a prerequisite.

My analysis demonstrates the limits of the categories “learning community” and “traditional community,” showing how features that support and hamper learning may coexist within a single teacher work group. I also turn attention to ways in which behavior that obstructs learning may make sense for teachers, examining the frames of collaboration within which such behavior is situated. I then explore the influence that these frames of collaboration may have on teachers' opportunities to make sense of mathematics and students in more equitable ways.

This paper contributes to analyses of the role of social and cultural dynamics in supporting—or inhibiting—teacher learning through collaboration. Prior research suggests that there is variance in these dynamics from place to place, based on cultural differences (see, for example, Lee, Zhang, and Yin's (2011) study of teachers in Hong Kong) as well as idiosyncrasies from group to group (e.g., Horn & Little, 2010). Yet there is also evidence that the particular professional norms and views of mathematics discussed in this paper are relevant in diverse countries, including the United States, Great Britain, Israel, and South Africa (as documented by McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Bolam et al., 2005; Segal, Vedder-Weiss, & Lefstein, 2015; and Brodie, 2010, respectively). In addition, having a body of knowledge that is developed in contexts where professional norms differ may prove useful in allowing the field to better understand the kinds of work that must be done, at the micro-interactional level as well as at the structural level, in order to make teacher collaboration fruitful.

## 2. Theoretical perspective: teacher learning as a negotiation of meaning

A conception of learning as a negotiation of meaning is central to this article (Vygotsky, 1986; Wenger, 1998). I am particularly concerned with how teachers negotiate the tensions between two kinds of meanings: traditional meanings—of mathematics as a discipline, students as learners, and the work of teaching itself—and equity- and reform-oriented meanings. I term the latter meanings *non-dominant* as well as equity- and reform-oriented in order to highlight their opposition to the meanings that contemporary American society makes commonsensical—i.e., to dominant discourses and ideologies. Reform discourses frame mathematical activity as inclusive of a variety of skills and practices, such as making sense of problems, reasoning quantitatively, and constructing arguments (e.g., *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, 2010); dominant discourse frames mathematical activity as consisting primarily of memorization and computation (Ball, 1988; Stigler & Hiebert, 1998). Reform discourses position *all* students as capable learners (e.g., *National Council of Teachers of Mathematics*, 2000); dominant discourse frames intellectual and especially mathematical ability as innate, fixed, and distributed along a bell-shaped curve (Parks, 2010; Ruthven, 1987). Reform discourses position *teachers* as learners who benefit from ongoing collaboration and support (e.g., Benitez, Davidson, & Flaxman, 2009); dominant discourse frames the work of teaching as

private, autonomous, and grounded in personal style and preference (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975).<sup>2</sup> Dominant discourses are thus *restrictive*: they limit students' opportunities to learn rich mathematics and teachers' opportunities to negotiate equity- and reform-oriented shifts in their practice. As teachers engage with non-dominant meanings that potentially *expand* learning opportunities, commonsense meanings do not simply disappear. Rather, they interact with non-dominant meanings in messy and complex ways that require careful study in order to understand how and what teachers learn.

Opportunities to navigate conflicting meanings arise in teachers' everyday interactions (cf. Wenger, 1998). Local communities of practice are key sites for the production and reproduction of resolutions to conflicts in meaning. Groups such as subject-matter departments or school-based teams may provide teachers with unique opportunities for interaction that are focused on their practice. In addition, teachers' communities of practice have their own local histories, which give rise to systems of meaning and naturalized ways of “doing things” that make particular meanings more or less available to teachers. Thus, in one professional community, teachers might be supported to talk about and view students who complete their work quickly as “fast learners” who need to be exposed to more content than their slower peers, while in another, speed might be understood as a barrier to complex thinking (Horn, 2007). Importantly, these meanings are all incomplete or “partial, tentative, ephemeral, and specific to a situation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 53); they require ongoing renegotiation and re-resolution, creating opportunities to negotiate new meanings and thereby to learn.

Shifts in meaning are often difficult to accomplish, however. Categories like “fast” and “slow” are part of local histories and of broader, extra-local discourses about what a good student is and does as well, making some meanings more sensible and more automatic than others. Thus, in order to come to view a “slow” student as a competent learner and contributor, a teacher must learn to see ways of contributing that are not generally visible, much less valued, in American schools. She must also resist dominant interpretations of speed that continue to assert themselves (e.g., through lengthy lists of standards outlining what should be learned in a given year, through pressures to “accelerate” students who are “gifted,” through ways that colleagues and students talk about competence, and through her own socially and culturally constructed intuitions about intelligence).

This article investigates teachers' opportunities to learn in everyday interactions in their communities of practice, as they take up, enact, and renegotiate local and extra-local meanings from moment to moment. I find that teachers encounter persistent tensions between restrictive and expansive discourses about mathematics, students, and teaching. The literature on teachers' professional communities suggests that equity- and reform-oriented communities support teachers to shift toward more inclusive, student-centered instruction, largely ignoring these tensions. I show that in the context of these tensions, the ways that teachers frame their own collaborative conversations—in particular, the kinds of knowledge that are relevant and the ways of participating that are appropriate—may render even an equity- and reform-oriented professional learning community unable to

<sup>2</sup> Some might argue that the meanings I term non-dominant are more mainstream than those I term dominant. Certainly, equity-oriented reforms have prompted many to reject the latter and adopt some of the former, at least rhetorically. But enactments of equity- and reform-oriented ideals remain quite rare in schools and classrooms. Negotiating equity- and reform-oriented meanings therefore continues to present challenges for teachers that negotiating more dominant meanings does not.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6850924>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6850924>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)