Building Professional Community in Schools

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The current school reform movement includes a strong emphasis on the "professionalization" of teachers' work. Commonly stated themes include the creation of more stringent standards of entry into the teaching field, developing a national licensing system for more advanced teachers, and boosting pay and training opportunities in order to attract and retain skilled, committed practitioners.

While these reforms may be critical, researchers and education reformers shouldn't focus solely on strategies for the development of individual professionals. Teaching, after all, does not begin and end in the classroom. At a minimum, a teacher's experiences with other faculty members, as well as with the school's leaders and organizational structure, will cause smiles or frustration. At maximum, these interactions can have a profound effect on the impact that a teacher has on his or her students.

Researchers and reformers can't afford to overlook the impact of decisions and actions that teachers, working together in some type of sustained professional contact, take to improve school performance. This collective reflection, development of standards and expectations, and formulation of plans for action are major hallmarks of a well-developed professional community. In schools where professional community is strong, teachers enjoy much greater support from their colleagues. Research suggests they feel more effective at their jobs.

Many leading scholars believe that the school must be the focus of change if education is to improve. We agree. Our study of this topic, therefore, centres on the type of professional community that is firmly embedded in the school community—as opposed to communities fostered by professional networks and other organizations beyond the school—and which uses the school's involvement in reform as the basis for teacher commitment and interaction.

This article discusses some of the benefits that schools enjoy when they develop strong professional communities, and what conditions and resources make the development of those communities possible. Based on data collected from schools studied by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, we examine which resources and conditions seem to be most critical to sparking and sustaining such development.

Empowerment and Beyond

The development of professional community in a particular school, or the lack of it, can have implications for other reform efforts. We have seen, for example, that merely granting teachers greater responsibility for decisions that affect their jobs, such as school policy and curriculum, doesn't guarantee that instruction will improve. Study of schools where these powers have been enhanced suggest that these new responsibilities, by themselves, don't always translate into an increased focus on teacher professional competence. Teachers may resist performing the extra administrative work that empowerment efforts bring. Or they may resist involvement in their school's decision-making process because their visions of professional conduct don't include an emphasis on issues of power and control. In such

cases, the mechanisms put in place to empower teachers can end up augmenting a principal's control of the school instead, or the mechanisms fail to focus on essential issues that affect classroom work.

This doesn't mean that teacher empowerment is not important. It means that in many settings, it is not enough. In order for students and teachers to benefit from empowerment, a professional community must develop among teachers, one committed to fundamental change in teaching practices.

A school-based professional community can offer support and motivation to teachers as they work to overcome the tight resources, isolation, time constraints, and other obstacles they commonly encounter in today's schools. Within a strong professional community, for example, teachers can work collectively to set and enforce standards of instruction and learning. Instead of obeying bureaucratic rules, faculty members act according to teachers' norms of professional behaviour and duty, which have been shown to be far stronger social control mechanisms. This also creates room within the school structure for principled disagreement and discussion on different issues, which can add to teachers' professional growth.

In schools where professional community is strong, teachers work together more effectively and put more effort into creating and sustaining opportunities for student learning.

Critical Elements

Professional communities are strong when the teachers in a school demonstrate five critical elements:

1. Reflective Dialogue
Members of the community talk about their situations and the specific challenges they face. Together, they develop a set of shared norms, beliefs, and values that form a basis for action. Members of the community can use these discussions to critique themselves, as well as the institution within which they work.

These critiques can take several different directions: They can focus on subject matter and how to present it to students, for example, on generic teaching strategies, on student learning and development, on the social conditions of schooling, and issues of equity and justice.

2. Deprivatization of Practice
Teachers share, observe, and discuss each other's teaching methods and philosophies; for example, through peer coaching. By sharing practice "in public," teachers learn new ways to talk about what they do, and the discussions kindle new relationships between the participants.

3. Collective Focus on Student Learning
Teachers are focused on student learning. They assume that all students can learn at reasonably high levels and that teachers can help them, despite many obstacles that students may face outside of school. Within a strong professional community, this focus is not enforced by rules, but by mutually felt obligation among teachers.

4. Collaboration
A strong professional community encourages teachers to work together, not only to develop shared understandings of students, curriculum, and instructional policy, but also to produce materials and activities that improve instruction, curriculum, and assessment for students, and to produce new and different approaches to staff development for the teachers themselves.

5. Shared Norms and Values
Through their words and actions, teachers joined in a professional community affirm their common values concerning critical educational issues, and in support of their collective focus on student learning. These values can address children and their ability to learn, priorities for the use of time and space within a school setting, and the proper roles of parents, teachers, and administrators.

For example, teachers might require students who are failing to take part in after-school study

sessions. They devise a school policy for dealing with the added burdens these sessions entail. This would show that teachers value student achievement and that they are willing to take responsibility for giving extra help to students who are failing.

Structural Conditions

Several conditions must be met in order for a professional community to develop and grow within a school. These can be grouped in two categories: structural conditions and human or social resources.

The necessary structural conditions include these:

- **Time to Meet and Talk.** This is essential to beginning and maintaining meaningful education reform within a school. There must be a formal process that provides substantial and regularly scheduled blocks of time for educators to conduct an ongoing self-examination and self-renewal.

   It's not enough for a school's leadership to simply tack another period onto the end of a workday that is already long and tiring. Such periods must be built into the school's schedule and calendar in a way that gives teachers opportunities to consider critical issues in a reflective manner.

   There should be almost daily opportunities for discussion among small groups with common interests, such as academic departments or grade levels, as well as regular meetings among the entire faculty.

- **Physical Proximity.** Physical isolation can be a real barrier to collaboration among teachers, especially in larger schools. Schools can increase teacher contact by creating team planning rooms or other common places for discussion of educational practices.

   In schools where classrooms are close together and "open door" policies are supported, teachers find it easier to work together and to gain new insight into their own practices. In such settings, it's much easier for teachers to continually observe each other and discuss what they see.

- **Interdependent Teaching Roles.** It's important for schools to create recurring formal situations in which teachers work together. Examples include team teaching and integrated lesson design. The team provides a lasting, substantial structure for sustained communication based in shared goals. As teachers work together, they develop a sense of community and a greater sense of effectiveness.

- **Communication Structures.** The development of a professional community requires structures and opportunities that encourage an exchange of ideas, both within and across such organizational units as teams, grade levels, and subject departments. Regular meetings or an electronic mail system, for example, can provide a network for the exchange of ideas on instruction, curriculum, assessment, and other professional issues.

- **Teacher Empowerment and School Autonomy.** Strong professional communities show high levels of teacher autonomy. Researchers suggest that teachers with more discretion to make decisions regarding their work feel more responsible for how well their students learn. The flexibility allows them to respond to the specific needs they see. Instead of being guided by rules, they are guided by the norms and beliefs of the professional community.

Social and Human Resources

The social and human resources that enhance professional community include these:

- **Openness to Improvement.** There must be support within the school for teachers who want to take risks and try new techniques and ideas. Otherwise, serious and lasting change

cannot be sustained. Teachers must feel they are supported in their efforts to learn more about their profession and to make decisions based on that new knowledge.

- **Trust and Respect.** Teachers must feel they are honoured for their expertise—within the school as well as within the district, the parent community, and other significant groups. Respect, trust, and a shared sense of loyalty build professional commitment and the cooperation required for collaboration and shared decision making.

- **Cognitive and Skill Base.** Professional community must be based on effective teaching, which in turn must be based on an expertise in the knowledge and skills of teaching. Structures such as peer counselling, along with help from external sources, can spread that expertise among faculty members and can thereby help marginal or ineffective teachers improve.

- **Supportive Leadership.** Whether a school is led by a principal or a site-based team, that leadership must be a prime "keeper" of the school's vision. Leadership needs to keep the school focused on shared purpose, continuous improvement, and collaboration.

  Communications from the school's leadership will set the tone for the school. For example, if a principal contacts the faculty only on matters of organizational procedure, teachers will see these as the school's major concern and may give less attention to teaching and learning.

- **Socialization.** As schools recruit and socialize new teachers, there must be a mechanism for passing along the school's vision to the newcomers. Staff must impart a sense that new teachers are an important and productive part of a meaningful collective. School culture must encourage some behaviours and discourage others, in a daily process aimed at working toward the school mission.

Preliminary Findings

To identify conditions and factors that have the most effect on the development of professional community, we have examined teacher surveys in 15 restructuring schools studied by the Center. It's impossible to draw hard conclusions from such a small sample, but the surveys point to some interesting implications.

For example, elementary schools in this sample have a stronger sense of professional community than secondary schools do, particularly high schools. However, some high schools that have worked hard on the development of interdisciplinary teams, a "common language" of reform, and other innovations showed levels of professional community that were equal to some of the elementary and middle schools in the study.

Still, we observe that reform tends to move more slowly at higher grade levels, because those schools—which generally offer more diverse curriculum to a more diverse student body than schools at lower grade levels—face greater challenges. Secondary schools, particularly high schools, must work hard to forge bonds between different departments and specializations if they are to move toward meaningful school-wide goals.

In the 15 restructuring schools studied thus far, however, school size does not appear to be a significant factor in the level of professional community observed. In this sample, the findings did not support the common belief that larger schools inevitably spawn subcultures that threaten strong school-wide community.

This doesn't mean that school size isn't a powerful factor in many schools, especially those which aren't undergoing restructuring. But it does suggest that problems created by a school's size can be overcome. Specific efforts and supportive leadership can, for example, create cohesive patterns of interaction among faculty members in large schools.

Gender composition also appears significant. Schools with a higher percentage of women on the faculty tend to develop a stronger sense of professional community. Other research indi-

cates that when women constitute a large majority, organizational culture is affected. Women tend to pay more attention to interpersonal relations than men typically do, and they are more likely to cooperate and encourage the development of community.

Structure or Human Resources: What's More Important?

Our research suggests that human resources—such as openness to improvement, trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership, and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions.

Structural conditions—including time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures, and teacher empowerment—are important, to be sure. But if a school lacks the social and human resources to make use of those structural conditions, it's unlikely that a strong professional community can develop.

This finding adds weight to the argument that the structural elements of restructuring have received too much emphasis in many reform proposals, while the need to improve the culture, climate, and interpersonal relationships in schools have received too little attention.

This points to a missing element in the movement toward system-wide education reform and increased professionalization of teaching: the development of schools as healthy, professionally sustaining environments in which teachers are encouraged to do their best.

Professional community within schools has been a minor theme in many educational reform efforts since the 1960s. Perhaps it is time that it become a major rallying cry among reformers, rather than a secondary whisper.

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