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“The Road Less Traveled”: Professional Communities in Secondary Schools

During the last 4 decades, numerous reform efforts have been proposed to improve schools. Two reforms, decentralization and teacher collaboration, seemed to coalesce by the 1990s to pave the way toward a new understanding of leading and learning in schools. In retrospect, the decentralization movement and the literature on teacher collaboration appear to have been significant precursors to an emerging concept called professional community. This article explores key aspects of professional community, discusses potential benefits, and examines difficulties that principals and teachers may face as they try to shift from familiar norms and relationships to the establishment of professional communities in schools. The shift may require principals and teachers to confront longstanding traditions and may involve profound changes in attitudes and practices. The article draws on the literature, as

well as illustrations from an empirical study in Maltese secondary schools, to suggest several ways in which the principal and other school members might facilitate the establishment of professional learning communities.

SECONDARY SCHOOLS HAVE OFTEN been accused of resisting change or being slow to change. During the last 4 decades, various reform efforts have been proposed to improve schools. Two efforts, decentralization and teacher collaboration, have paved the way toward a new understanding of leading and learning in schools. The decentralization movement and the literature on teacher collaboration appear to have been significant precursors to an emerging concept called the professional learning community (PLC). This article explores benefits of PLCs as highlighted in the literature and in a case study of a Maltese secondary school that is on its way to becoming a PLC. It also acknowledges concerns and difficulties that leaders and teachers face as they take the road less traveled.

The literature suggests that schools working to become PLCs will likely face similar issues re-

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ardless of geographical location. These issues include self-management, leadership, collegial relationships, the development of collective capacity, and a focus on teaching and learning.

The Self-Managing School

The concept of the PLC has its roots in school improvement literature that emphasizes the self-managing nature of the improving school. Schools are more effective when they are organizations that can take control and determine ways of addressing local and national agendas (e.g., prescribed curricula, national standards) but at the same time are aided by external support (Leithwood & Lewis, 2000). In short, when schools are empowered and can operate within a context of autonomy and support, they have much better prospects for improvement.

Researchers have been looking for similarities among schools with successful school improvement programs to create lists of what works in school improvement. Harris (2002) conducted a broad comparative analysis of highly successful school improvement programs and demonstrated a number of shared principles or features. This comparative study showed that although the school improvement programs and projects under scrutiny varied in terms of content, nature, and approach, they reflected a similar philosophy. Central to this philosophy was an adherence to the belief that the school is the center of change and the teacher is the catalyst for classroom change and development. Within these highly effective school improvement programs, shared nonnegotiable elements included a commitment to professional development, devolved leadership, and a focus on teaching and learning (Harris & Chapman, 2002; Mulford, 2003).

Schools are influenced by politics, society, and their local context (Gronn, 2002). Thus, even if current educational discourse supports particular developments and proposes ideals toward which the nation should work, the reception of new ideas and practices still depends on the way the concepts of power, influence, authority, coercion, manipu-

lation, and deterrence have influenced and determined practices in the past. Moving from a highly centralized system of education to a more decentralized mode of practice, or what Fullan (2003) described as the moral imperative of school leadership, demands hard work. Assumptions about the traditional role of the principal must be examined, stakeholders must learn how to change roles to be involved participants, the concept of learning must change, and then supportive procedures must follow.

With a similar philosophy in mind, during the last decade Malta has been moving away from a highly centralized and bureaucratic system to one that encourages broader involvement in policy making and more collaboration among stakeholders. Initiated by the Ministry of Education and supported at the national level, educators and schools have greater responsibility to determine the way forward and to develop schools as learning communities. Salafia's (2003) study to discover how a Maltese secondary school was moving toward becoming a PLC illustrated how schools may begin the change process and suggested steps for further growth (see Table 1). Teachers rated their school as having a good beginning and discovered that they had some favor-

Table 1
Key Initiatives

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1. Teaching staff and principal introduced to the concept of the learning community
 2. Questionnaire surveys and interviews held with teaching staff
 3. Interviews held with pupils
 4. Interviews with teachers, Senior Management Team, and principal
 5. Review of school documentation
 6. Seminars and staff meetings introduced
 7. Collaborative practices introduced (with a focus on gender equity) to develop school vision and aims
 8. Identification of staff assigned special responsibilities to coach, mentor, and facilitate learning
 9. Pupil involvement
 10. Parental involvement
 11. Feedback to principal and staff
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able foundations on which to build. Indeed, the study indicated that the school's stronger building blocks were learning dynamics and organizational transformation. Their weaker building blocks included technology and its use, people empowerment, and knowledge management (American Society for Training & Development, 1998).

Teacher interviews revealed that the school provided opportunities for teachers' personal learning and development, mainly through seminars and staff development meetings. As for collective or group learning, school documentation showed that a number of working groups, generally organized around subject matter, were already in place. Teachers believed that working group meetings were useful because they helped teachers share ideas, direct their teaching, and solve problems that emerged. Such meetings created an opportunity to address issues together. "Brainstorming helped us resolve problems dealing with special situations and topics," noted one teacher. Furthermore, the opportunity to share allowed them to come together and abide by decisions taken. "We share ideas about how to do things and stick together in planning various activities."

To develop the organization, the principal and the Senior Management Team (SMT) began examining the school's strategies, structure, and culture. However, an issue of leadership and participation quickly became apparent. The principal expressed concern that, although schools were being given greater responsibility in determining school development, the political context in which reforms were taking place were still being determined by central authorities or union mandates.

The literature and the Maltese case study suggest that before PLCs can be established, certain prerequisites at the systems level are helpful. These include:

- genuine belief in the benefits of decentralization and the various forms it can take;
- the development of a clear strategic plan that allows all stakeholders to change, adapt, and develop the appropriate attitudes, values, and dispositions to take on more responsibilities at various levels of the education system; and

- an appropriate infrastructure that would allow such a process to be introduced.

Leadership for Successful School Reform

Effective or purposeful leadership is generally accepted as a central component in implementing and sustaining school improvement. Evidence from school improvement literature, starting with seminal studies in the United States (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker 1979; Edmonds, 1982) and the United Kingdom (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979), consistently highlight that effective leaders exercise a direct or indirect but powerful influence on the school's capacity to implement reforms and improve students' levels of achievement. Although quality of teaching strongly influences and determines the level of student motivation and achievement, quality of leadership matters in determining the motivation of teachers and the quality of their teaching (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

The past decade has produced some major developments in the reconceptualization of educational leadership for successful school reform. Leadership is now associated with concepts such as empowerment, transformation, and community. Leadership no longer refers only to titular or officially designated leaders, but can be distributed within the school among members of teaching or support staff. The ability to lead is dependent on others and the relationships or networks leaders cultivate (Fullan, 2001). Thus, teachers as leaders and teachers as supporters of leaders are beginning to play a central role in determining school reform.

The concept of teacher leadership is not a new concept in a number of countries, notably the United States, Canada, and Australia, and researchers have documented leadership roles and functions of teachers in processes of successful school reform for some time (Silins, Mulford, Zarins, & Bishop, 2000). More recently, researchers have begun exploring efforts that involve teacher leaders at various levels of school im-

provement in additional countries. Their work examines teacher leadership as it relates to distributed leadership, sustainable leadership, teacher teaming, and collective approaches to school improvement (Hollingsworth, 2004).

Data from the Maltese school showed that the principal realized that she needed to make a personal commitment to encourage the shift in beliefs necessary for forging new kinds of relationships between, and among, all members of staff. She also realized that she needed to be an exemplary role model. Her stated belief of modeling good practice was evident in her comment, "What you believe in is contagious. Indeed, to walk the talk is no mere slogan." The principal pointed out that retaining enthusiasm in spite of difficulties is draining in its own right. She found this role of leader as model quite daunting and extremely time consuming, so her efforts have been sporadic, although she wants to be more structured and strategic in her approach.

Other members of the SMT agreed with the principal that modeling desired dispositions and actions to enhance other members' capacities and enthusiasm for change is challenging and psychologically demanding. As one deputy principal said, "Listening to everyone's opinions, taking on board varied and at times diverse suggestions, and trying to draw some common conclusions is far from easy." And, to really highlight the difficulties of engaging people in collaborative work, one teacher stated "The opportunity to come together really brings out the real character of people!"

The principal saw her leadership role as that of a designer, a teacher, and a steward. She explained her role of designer as being involved in building a shared vision for the school. Building a shared vision consisted of building teamwork to develop the school aims and to see that they were reached (Salafia, 2003). Work produced through teamwork efforts showed some success.

The principal saw her leadership role as that of teacher in the sense that she attended to systemic structures by introducing more democratic processes into the school. Although the school lacked an overarching vision, the principal had what Senge (1993) described as a *purpose story*, or a larger vision that went beyond the school (i.e.,

how the school's efforts fit into the larger picture of national decentralization of authority). However, at the time the research was carried out, the principal in her role as a teacher did not put enough emphasis on the purpose story. Minimal reference to the story was made during meetings and in the school's documentation. In a similar way, there was no observable action or documentation that seemed to integrate the purpose story with the systemic structures the principal initiated.

In her leadership role as steward, the principal seemed to be taking care of the school aims by creating structures to see that they were reached. However, not enough emphasis was made to publicize and develop her global personal vision or purpose story. The staff needed more help to relate the school aims (and eventually the shared vision of the school) to the principal's broader vision in concrete terms.

The literature and the case study suggest that a PLC needs strong leadership. These include:

- a visionary principal who serves as a role model and steward;
- a commitment to involve and empower teachers in decision making responsibilities; and
- the necessity of negotiating a vision that staff understand and share.

At the same time, the study illustrated struggles and concerns of staff members who are committed to learning and changing. These include:

- assistance with learning to share different opinions and learning to give and receive constructive criticism; and
- the importance of discussions about the relationship of the school's efforts and the broader reform vision.

Collegial Relationships

Various researchers (Gray et al., 1999; Harris & Chapman, 2002) have shown that there are certain internal preconditions to successful improvement. These include a focus on establishing relationships and a shared sense of purpose, the

collective capacity of staff, and an emphasis on teaching and learning.

Stoll and Fink (1996) argued that establishing relationships between teachers helps to extend their morale and encourages the development of a clear and shared sense of purpose, greater collaboration, and collective responsibility for student learning. Collegial relations and collective learning are at the core of building the capacity for school improvement. This implies a particular form of teacher development that extends teaching repertoires and engages teachers in changing their practice (Hopkins & Harris, 1997). Highly effective school improvement projects reflect a form of teacher development that concentrates on and goes beyond enhancing teaching skills, knowledge, and competency. It involves teachers in an exploration of different approaches to teaching and learning, often based on fundamental educational principles that are being introduced, revisited, or reviewed (Frost, 2003).

In this study, teacher interviews revealed that the school provided opportunities for teachers' personal learning and development, mainly through seminars, working group meetings, and staff development meetings. However, what this study helped to bring out is that although teachers valued the organized meetings, they stated that when there was no designated authority or person who could bring out the various mental models of the group, problems were not really resolved. In this sense, group learning was slow or insignificant. As one teacher pointed out, "We discuss issues openly. . . . However, we do find it hard at times to reach a compromise, especially when some members are adamant about their point of view, and are unwilling to see alternative viewpoints."

The meetings surfaced interpersonal issues and differences, as well as decision-making issues. The difficulty of getting people to learn how to accept different opinions and to view reality in different ways is highlighted by the principal's comment, "Teachers and management need time to accept positive criticism, to learn that other people may hold different opinions and that we need to start opening up. Democratizing the decision-making process is fraught with difficulties." Teachers thought group meetings helped empower

them but they did not see sharing information as a way to improve their teaching and student learning. As yet, teachers have not started to engage in matters that are ultimately central to school improvement. Given the sensitivity of engaging teachers to talk about how they teach, especially in a context of teacher isolation, it will take time to get to that stage.

Furthermore, teachers' sharing of students' work was limited to a short period of time that they spent with parents during Parents' Day. Not only was the use of data to inform practice a weak dimension, the working groups seemed to lack adequate techniques to resolve conflict and to overcome ingrained behaviors. The accumulation and generation of ideas, as well as sharing good practices among teachers, was limited to a few sessions throughout the academic year. Meetings with other teachers in the school or with teachers from other schools were practically nonexistent. The school still needed assistance toward two indicators of PLCs: PLCs constantly find ways of using the information they have to good effect, and they design strategies to ensure that all children are learning (DuFour, 2004).

This case study has helped to highlight particular points identified in the literature, specifically:

- establishing relationships seems to require time, practice, and assistance; and
- establishing relationships are fundamental to counter isolation and to improve curriculum and instruction.

At the same time, the study helps us appreciate that:

- direction and leadership are essential, especially in the initial stages of establishing PLCs;
- individual and group learning is a slow process.

Collective Capacity

Schools that improve become learning communities that generate the capacity and capability to sustain that improvement. They are "communities of practice" (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 140) that pro-

vide a context for collaboration and the generation of shared meaning. “Such communities hold the key to transformation—the kind that has real effects on people’s lives” (Wenger, 1998, p. 85).

It follows that schools can sustain improvement through capacity building and equipping teachers to lead innovation and development. The message is unequivocal: sustaining the impact of improvement requires the leadership capability of many rather than of few, and improvements in learning are more likely to be achieved when leadership is instructionally focused on teaching and learning. It also implies that initiatives are undertaken in a systematic and sustainable manner within the school setting. Therefore, rather than being a reform initiative, a PLC becomes the supporting structure for schools to continuously transform themselves through their own internal capacity (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Wald & Castleberry, 2000). It occurs every day in activities such as sharing of good practices and model lessons, cross-disciplinary teaching, cross-grade activities, and sharing of subject matter expertise.

DuFour (2004) encouraged schools to reflect on their collective capacity to address the learning needs of students. He concluded that ongoing improvement efforts can succeed only when a community of colleagues supports each other through the inevitable difficulties associated with school reform. The major challenge in certain schools will be that of breaking the norm of teaching in isolation. When working alone, teachers get used to certain patterns of learning, teaching, assimilating, changing, or retaining the status quo. Changing norms and patterns of thinking and behaving within the workplace may be neither easy nor welcomed by all. Nevertheless, “as in many other professions, the commitment to critical and systematic reflection on practice as a basis for individual and collective development is at the heart of what it means to be a professional teacher” (MacBeath, 1988, p. 9).

One powerful way that teachers are encouraged to reflect on and improve their practice is through a process of inquiry, by which they can consider their work in a critical way. Collective inquiry can

be further strengthened through more democratic forms of governance.

In schools where isolation has been the norm, individual and collective reflection or inquiry is unlikely to occur unless teachers and principals strengthen human relations that have previously remained at only a congenial and superficial level. Without this awareness, teachers and the SMT of the secondary school in Malta wanted to realign school development and school improvement with the way humans relate and interact with each other. They expressed concern that schools, in general, have become too mechanical and that interactions have never been humanized. Some of their suggestions for achieving that goal included sharing power and giving opportunities for all staff members to make decisions and own the choices they make, and allowing all school members to be involved in defining the purpose of the school and the culture the school community will uphold.

The literature and the case study suggest that:

- collective capacity includes the encouragement and nurturing of reflection and inquiry as well as individual and collective growth;
- sustained improvement requires collective effort; and
- an insular way of thinking and working require time, patience, and commitment to overcome.

A Focus on Teaching and Learning

Schools that are successful facilitate the learning of their teachers and their students (Harris, 2002). The quality of professional development and adult learning consequently becomes an essential component of successful school improvement interventions and is a hallmark of professional learning communities. Teachers’ knowledge of subject matter and pedagogical skills and strategies is vital if students are to learn well. But teachers are, first and foremost, persons, and are therefore influenced by their own personal lives, their own well being, their personal views or beliefs about teaching and learning, and the life chances they cre-

ate. This, in itself, makes the issue more complex and difficult to unravel, let alone manage.

A major issue in helping teachers learn involves identifying time for collaboration throughout the school year. The Maltese principal and teachers commented that they were dedicating more time than before on meetings to discuss whole-school matters and curriculum issues. They were concerned, however, that they could not manage their time or structure time according to their needs, given that they had to work within the confines of national teachers' union directives. Moreover, the principal complained that she was currently not involved in curriculum matters and only administratively involved in overseeing the teaching process. She intuited that teachers were not yet engaged in the crucial domain of “ensuring that students learn ... [by] focusing on results” (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). Yet, unless schools discuss areas pertinent to student learning, they fail to address the main reason for a school's existence—being there for the children.

The literature consistently shows that PLCs focus efforts on improving the teaching and learning process. However, this study suggests that

- although leadership is necessary to get staff to focus on teaching and learning, teachers may not see the principal as the curriculum or instructional leader of the school; and
- whereas time is a perennial issue for individual and collaborative teacher learning and collective decision making, personal beliefs and well-being, as well as group process skills, may play as important a role as professional knowledge and skills in changing teaching and learning in schools.

What Have We Learned About PLCs?

The experiences of the secondary school in Malta may help change agents in other countries appreciate the challenges that schools may face as they work toward establishing themselves as PLCs within a context of devolved authority to the school site. The study may also provide a number

of lessons for understanding areas requiring support and establishing assistance to develop those areas. The following list presents the Maltese learning outcomes to date. Perhaps one of the most notable outcomes is the length of time staff may need to change beliefs and behaviors.

1. The school's main strengths have been identified (i.e., learning dynamics and organizational transformation).
2. The school's main weaknesses have been identified (i.e., technology and its use, people empowerment, and knowledge management).
3. The principal is learning to take on the role of designer, teacher, and steward.
4. New learning patterns based on trust, commitment, and willingness to share are being established.
5. The principal is learning to involve others in the decision-making process.
6. The principal has difficulty changing own leadership style and encouraging staff members to challenge their own as they work more cooperatively and collaboratively.
7. Isolation and dependency are being challenged, but this is a slow process.

Clearly, a process of developing a PLC can exert considerable pressure on all individuals, and particularly those in leadership roles. In the Maltese case, the principal found the growing complexity of the work daunting and demanding, yet she understood that a leader's hard work, modeling, and personal commitment to a worthy cause can have a positive and motivating effect on colleagues. On the other hand, engaging in the process of becoming a PLC allowed her and the SMT to develop individually and collectively as they began to learn how to relate to others in new ways, how to communicate better, and how to distribute decision making and leadership tasks.

As identified in the literature, the school principal as leader has a central role to play in nurturing the internal conditions for developing a school into a PLC. This study suggests that the principal, together with the SMT, faced major challenges at a number of levels: the personal, the psychological,

and the professional. The principal realized she had to express a genuine commitment to learning if she wanted to instill the enthusiasm and build the morale of the staff. She also realized that nurturing a culture of respect in a context of dependency and isolation is psychologically demanding.

The SMT expressed the sense of isolation members felt and the need for educators at the system level to provide them with the support and encouragement necessary to take their school forward. Schools need help to develop and to sustain enthusiasm. The Maltese case suggests that for a school faculty to develop personally and collegially, individual and organizational commitment is necessary. Within the school, the principal can help structure the organization in ways that nurture learning opportunities. In the Maltese school, the principal and SMT are encouraging individual and organizational learning by providing teamwork opportunities to focus on educational principles, to reflect on issues the faculty identifies, and to open channels of communication.

As the teachers discovered, forging new and unfamiliar kinds of collegial relationships is challenging even when a group or organization is willing to pursue group initiatives. Empowerment may initially be exhilarating, but group decisions take longer than unilateral decisions, and discussions may create conflict. The Maltese school has already identified that it lacks adequate techniques to resolve conflicting and ingrained attitudes and norms. The teachers are still unable to think beyond their own subject area or classroom, so they find whole-school issues difficult to tackle. Pertinent information is often lacking or limited to specific individuals, and disseminating information is proving difficult. Nevertheless, opportunities for people to grow beyond their current practices are slowly challenging present mindsets.

What the Maltese experience also seems to suggest is that teachers appear to need strong leadership to examine the teaching and learning process in their school. Principals, traditionally and perhaps unrealistically, have been expected to provide curricular and instructional leadership, but teacher-leaders may be in a more logical position to take on this role. Principals are assuming more and more administrative and management duties

and finding themselves in the paradoxical situation of either wanting to, or being asked to, assume more responsibilities regarding school affairs, but at the same time having limited time to help teachers. Cardno and Collett (2003) have suggested that principals might resolve this dilemma in a more indirect and strategic way by distributing and delegating leadership tasks.

Finally, the Maltese experience exposed the importance of learning at every level: individual, group (SMT), and organizational. PLCs change “people’s habitual ways of talking and thinking” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 76) and require people’s routine ways of interacting to mature to a more professional level. On the other hand, PLCs offer opportunities for principals and teachers to discuss and change teaching and learning, to learn conflict resolution, and to assume leadership opportunities and responsibilities. Above all, schools need time and support to learn together as they pursue the road less traveled.

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