Key Factors in Successful Professional Learning Communities

In this thoughtful article in *Teachers College Record*, Tamara Holmlund Nelson, David Slavit, and Angie Deuel of Washington State University/Vancouver note the great popularity of "professional learning community" work in schools around the country and report on their five-year study of secondary-school math and science teachers working collaboratively with student-learning data such as classwork, homework, oral responses, quizzes and tests, and lab reports. Their goal was to get inside the "black box" of teacher collaboration and find the specific components of successful PLCs.

"Despite the 'optimistic premise' of PLCs," the authors say, "there are numerous pitfalls associated with the enactment and scaling up of these efforts." All too many teachers lack the skills and support to use data in ways that improve classroom practices, and some districts put too much pressure on schools to raise test scores versus pursuing the deeper, longer-range goals of improving instruction and student understanding.

Nelson, Slavit, and Deuel found that teachers' *stance* toward PLC work was what made the difference in how well they used data – "their beliefs and perspectives about what constitutes worthwhile information, how these data might inform their collaborative goals… and the relationship between data, instruction, and learning…" Observing the PLC teams over five years, the authors found that some had a *proving* stance while others had an *improving* stance:

• *Proving stance* – These teams tended to operate at quite a general level, and used data to convince themselves that what they were doing was right. When they retaught material, they did so in the same or a similar manner with little attention to rethinking practice. The authors identified two levels of this stance and called the most rigid <u>categorical</u>:

- Student learning goals are generalizations and/or labels.
- Teachers' content knowledge consists of a set of discrete facts, skills, and isolated statements about concepts.
- Student learning data are used to verify the effectiveness of teaching practices.
- Teams seek confirmation of pre-existing questions related to student achievement.
- Student data tend to be viewed as summative.
- Teachers talk in terms of whether students "got it" or "didn't get it."
- Analysis centers on overall student-achievement trends.

A somewhat less rigid level of the proving stance is <u>teaching-focused</u>:

- With learning goals, there's some attention to sub-concepts within a big idea.
- Teachers know a predetermined set of learning goals.
- Data are used to guide practice.
- Teachers look at student work with respect to tightly bounded answers.
- Findings are used to make superficial or minimal changes in practice, or changes targeted to generalized student populations.

- Analysis uncovers trends in student achievement using refined categories with some attention to specific student understandings.
- Analysis centers on identification of trends in student achievement, sometimes in multiple areas.
- *Improving stance* – These teachers see assessments as tools to better understand their students' thinking, try new things, and improve classroom practice. The first of two levels of the improving stance is <u>learning-focused</u>:
    - Learning goals are focused on sub-concepts, but they're not always linked to each other or a big idea.
    - Teachers know the big idea they are teaching and isolated sub-concepts.
    - Data are used to improve practice.
    - Teachers learn from student understandings to improve teaching.
    - Findings are used to reflect on and change targeted aspects of instructional practice.
    - Analysis uncovers general trends in student thinking and achievement and teachers distinguish between general levels of student understanding.
    - Item analysis is used to identify some trends in student ideas and overall understanding.

The highest level of an improving stance is <u>nuanced</u>:
    - Learning goals link together specific sub-concepts within a big idea.
    - Teachers understand big ideas and multiple, related sub-concepts.
    - Teachers use data to think about practice.
    - Teachers generate new questions and use data to pursue them.
    - Findings are used for reflecting on and changing future practice.
    - Analysis focuses on uncovering degrees of (or differences in) student understanding.
    - Item analysis is used to identify specific student ideas and multiple views of student understanding.

Teachers with the improving stance also tend to see beyond their own classrooms. One middle school teacher said, "Our school has shifted from a focus on *my* kids to a focus on *our* kids when thinking about teaching."

Nelson, Slavit, and Deuel also analyzed the type of dialogue within PLC teams as they talked about data. They noticed a continuum from *no negotiation* to *sustained negotiation*. Here's the lowest level – <u>disconnected talk</u>:
    - Teachers' comments are disconnected from each other and the group's collaborative purpose; teachers tell stories and give each other advice.
    - Comments are authoritative statements or personal stories.
    - Talk about teaching is general and there's frequent use of labels and generalizations.
    - Claims are asserted as fact with only anecdotal evidence.
    - Teachers are very sure of what they say.

- When questions are asked, they are technical, procedural, or personal; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, and values are seldom questioned – and when they are, it's considered rude.
- There are few links to instruction.
- Knowledge and beliefs are fixed.
- Teachers are congenial with each other, but some don't contribute.

The next level up is <u>connected talk</u>:

- Comments connect to an immediate task but don't build on other teachers' ideas.
- Ideas are shared as factual or authoritative.
- The dialogue is descriptive or evaluative with frequent use of labels and generalizations.
- Evidence is used to justify claims, sometimes with artifacts, often with anecdotes.
- Teachers occasionally express uncertainty or curiosity.
- Questions are procedural, technical, or for clarification; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, values are not pursued collectively.
- Links to instruction are seldom explored.
- Knowledge and beliefs are relatively fixed.
- Teachers are more or less congenial, with some members contributing only occasionally.

The next-to-top level is <u>exploratory talk</u>:

- Teachers build on each others' ideas with some pursuit of common meaning-making, critical comments, and alternatives.
- Teachers tacitly reach out to each other for genuine dialogue.
- The dialogue alternates between description and analysis.
- Evidence is shared, but it may be weak or unclear; questions are raised.
- There's a noticeable element of wondering and uncertainty.
- Authentic questions emerge; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, values are raised but may not be pursued deeply.
- Some links to instruction are made.
- Knowledge and beliefs are occasionally questioned and reexamined.
- Teachers are congenial, and most contribute in discussions.

The highest level is <u>inquiry-based talk</u>:

- Teachers' comments build on each other and dialogue spans meetings; teachers critique each other; alternatives are posed and examined.
- Teachers' comments are tentative and invite dialogue.
- Descriptions support analysis.
- Evidence is sought, provided, and critically analyzed by the group, and new questions are raised.
- Teachers hypothesize; group members often use tentative statements like, "I wonder," "Maybe," and "Do you think…"

- Authentic questions emerge from artifacts; meanings, assumptions, beliefs, and values are examined.
- Links to instructional practices are critically examined.
- Knowledge and beliefs are regularly questioned and examined.
- Teachers are collegial with each other and, over time, all participants contribute.

Nelson, Slavit, and Deuel close by speculating about the relationship between the two dimensions – are they linked? Can a teacher be at the *proving* end of the spectrum on the first dimension and the *inquiry* end on the other? And what's involved in getting teacher teams to the more effective levels? "[M]oving toward the more transformative ends of each dimension involves cultural, ideological, and intellectual shifts for many teachers," say the authors. Does there need to be a critical mass within a team to make it happen? "To what degree does a dominant voice, or a recalcitrant voice, impact a group stance?" they ask. "Is there a relationship between teacher buy-in for collaborative work in a PLC and an inquiry stance toward student-learning data?" More research is needed to answer these questions, they conclude.

"Two Dimensions of an Inquiry Stance Toward Student-Learning Data" by Tamara Holmlund Nelson, David Slavit, and Angie Deuel in *Teachers College Record*, August 2012 (Vol. 114, #8, p. 1-42), http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16532