BCTF Research Report

Part of the BCTF Information Handbook

Recent literature on Professional Learning Communities: Informing options for Canadian teacher unions?

---

bctf.ca/publications.aspx?id=5630

By Charlie Naylor, Ph.D., BCTF Research Department
October 2007

The purpose of this paper is to review recent literature on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and to examine how teacher unions might consider their policies and positioning with regard to PLCs. The paper consists of three sections:

- Professional Learning Communities—an extract from Naylor, 2005;

- A review of the recent PLC literature;

- Discussion and implications for teacher unions.

The 2007 BCTF AGM approved a motion to "oppose Professional Learning Communities models that are contrived or coerced." This paper is intended to support locals' and members' discussions about concepts of collaborative professional development in general, and about PLCs as one example of such collaboration.

Professional Learning Communities—an extract from Naylor, 2005

In 2005, I wrote a paper titled "A teacher union's collaborative research agenda and strategies: One way forward for Canadian teacher unions in supporting teachers' Professional Development?" *This paper, which can be accessed on the BCTF web site[1], includes a short section on Professional Learning Communities. For ease of reference, this section is repeated below:*

Authors such as Randi and Zeichner (2004) stress the notion that preferred forms of professional development are also collaborative, involving teachers in discourse, which by involvement in the processes of conversation or dialogue, promotes greater learning and sharing. This common-sense notion has been elevated to near-cult status with the notion of "professional learning

---

[1] http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2005tr01.pdf

communities," at a time when many school systems have decimated or reduced the quality of school communities by fiscally-driven change, or by accountability-driven demands.

The components of learning communities were listed by Hargreaves (2003) as:

- collaborative work and discussion among the school's professionals;

- a strong and consistent focus on teaching and learning within that collaborative work; and

- gathering assessment and other data to inquire into and evaluate progress and problems over time.

Hargreaves added:

> Professional learning communities lead to strong and measurable improvement in students' learning. Instead of bringing about 'quick fixes' of superficial change, they create and support sustainable improvements that last over time, because they build the professional skill and capacity to keep the school progressing. (p. 128)

The school-based nature of professional learning communities was further explored by Eaker et al. (2002), who argued for significant cultural shifts within schools: from isolation to collaboration; from generic to specific statements about students' learning; from random to specific values and goals. Collaboration, in Eaker's view (as well as in the views of others promoting professional learning communities), appears prescriptive rather than relationship-based, and reads much like the lists generated during the era of "effective schools." The latter is hardly surprising, as many of the professional-learning-community advocates were previously the proponents of effective schools. The requirements of this form of community appear to subsume the individual to the common good but with processes defined, established, and often controlled.

DuFour et al. (2005) state that the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has been widely endorsed by (US) National Commissions/Boards as well as by both of the national US teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). But while the concept appears to have wide support, DuFour et al. identify three challenges that they believe prevent the concept becoming a reality: developing and applying shared knowledge, sustaining the hard work of change, and transforming school culture. Yet the stating of these challenges implicitly reflects a belief that building community can be achieved through adhering to the recipe-book approach and stern directions of the PLC proponents:

> Many schools and districts that proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities have shown little evidence of either understanding the core concepts or implementing the practices of PLCs. Educators must develop a deeper, shared knowledge of learning community concepts and practices, and then must demonstrate the discipline to apply those concepts and practices in their own settings if their schools are to be transformed. (p. 9)

This kind of lecturing on community-building is not likely to generate wide support among teachers, and the hectoring tone contrasts with the same authors' encouraging messages of collaboration and mutual support. Such a contrast reflects the problematic dichotomy of the literature on professional learning communities: That the positive messages of collaboration are tempered with prescription and control. Telling teachers to "demonstrate the discipline" implies a controlling view of community that perhaps is not shared among many teachers, who might

wish for a flatter and more egalitarian form of collegial discourse. To use a medical analogy, DuFour's work implies that success follows adherence to a prescription—using drugs to achieve a cure, which may not always be appropriate, and may sometimes be wrong. Or the cure may be achieved through other, more holistic approaches without resorting to drugs. Those prescribing the drugs see only one solution, yet many people increasingly demand alternatives to drugs mandated by an "expert," so forcing the prescription may generate rejection or non-compliance. Many educators may not choose prescriptions generated by others and forced upon them, a situation surely compatible with teachers as professionals. Approaches that offer structures and options that are flexible and adaptable may have better chances of success and sustainability.

A review of the recent PLC literature

Stoll et al. (2006) produced an extensive review of the PLC literature. Stoll et al. argue that PLCs are not new, tracing influences back to Dewey (1929), Stenhouse (1975), and Schon (1983). Bullough (2007) also traces substantial elements of PLCs back to the landmark 'Eight-year Study' in the nineteen-thirties and early -forties in the USA.

Stoll et al. reference Westheimer's (1999) five features of community:

- shared beliefs and understandings;
- interaction and participation;
- interdependence;
- concern for individual and minority views;
- meaningful relationships.

They also list five features of PLCs identified in the literature and add three from their own research. The five from the literature are:

- shared values and vision;
- collective responsibility;
- reflective professional inquiry;
- collaboration;
- promotion of group as well as individual learning.

The three features from their own research are:

- mutual trust, respect and support;
- inclusive membership of a whole school community, including support staff;
- openness, networking, and partnerships beyond school boundaries.

While their section on leadership focuses to some extent on principal leadership, it also stresses "leadership at all levels" and "distributed leadership," areas of considerable interest to teacher unions looking to promote and support teacher leadership.

Their review also includes networking across schools and communities as part of the PLC concept, stating that "networked learning communities and PLCs rest on similar assumptions

about how teachers learn and change their practice," quoting Toole and Louis (2002), who discussed several factors linked to building community:

> These include that teaching is inherently a non-routine and complex activity (i.e., teachers will need to continue learning throughout their career); that there is a great deal of untapped knowledge already existing in schools; that the challenges teachers face are partly localized and will need to be addressed "on the ground," and that teachers improve by engaging with their peers in analysis, evaluation and experimentation. (p. 248)

Such networking is a key feature of a UBC SSHRC-funded research project proposal, "Professional Learning Communities: A multi-case study in three countries" (Erickson, 2007). This project will consider PLCs in China, Australia, and Canada (Vancouver), with Vancouver elementary teachers participating in a "virtual PLC" through web-based discussion groups and a project web site.

In an understated section of their review, Stoll et al. discuss pressures on teachers which make PLCs less likely to succeed, because teachers may not be inclined to interact with colleagues. These include teacher stress, constant educational change, "diversions caused by paperwork or administration," and union policies and practices.

Copland & Knapp (2006) list five essential tasks for building professional communities:

- building trusting relationships among professionals in the school or district;
- creating structures and schedules that sustain interaction among professionals;
- helping to frame joint work and shared responsibilities;
- modeling, guiding and facilitating participation in professional communities that value learning;
- promoting a focus on learning and associated core values.

A second comprehensive review of the PLC literature was produced by the InPraxis Group for Alberta Education (2006)[2]. This 80-page report includes the Alberta Teachers' Association's J.C. Couture's (2003) "three pathways in the PLC journey in Alberta schools":

- developing a shared identity by taking responsibility for each other;
- improving teaching by learning from our differences as practitioners;
- defining and naming together what student success looks like.

The InPraxis report blends an extensive literature review with promising examples from the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)[3], and summary charts which show different authors' views of PLC attributes. They also include a very useful annotated bibliography. The report concludes:

> PLCs are increasingly recognized as an important aspect of the relationship and culture within school environments. In Alberta and across North America, evolving understandings emphasize the need to centre initiatives in local, school-based contexts as well as to consider the broader supports, necessary from district

---

[2] http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/K_12/special/aisi/pdfs/Prof_Learng_Communities_2006.pdf
[3] http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special/aisi/

4

and provincial organizations, to sustain them. There is consensus that PLCs can improve professional practice and efficacy as well as student learning and growth and that processes centred on teacher inquiry and decision-making impact the effectiveness of PLCs. There are also increasing calls for structures and supports that facilitate the development of school cultures that encourage effective and sustainable PLCs. These supports are typically focused on the provision of time and flexible logistical structures within a school's organizational structures, the ability to form collaborative working relationships and the allocation of resources to develop leadership capacity and provide professional development support. Researchers agree that, within the context of a facilitative school culture, PLCs have potential to significantly impact teacher practice, views of learning and student achievement. (p. 43)

The development of PLCs, and Alberta's approach to school improvement through AISI, has involved the provincial teachers' union, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). Indeed, this is obliquely recognized in the above quote, where the authors stress support from "provincial organizations," including the ATA. This demonstrates the capacity of government and unions to collaborate to develop forms of PLC of utility to government, school districts, and the teacher union, a model deserving of some consideration in BC.

A recent and valuable addition to the PLC literature is a book edited by Stoll and Louis (2007), which includes a range of analyses of PLCs, from those in secondary schools (McLaughlin & Talbert), to those involving school support staff (Bolam, Stoll & Greenwood), and linking PLCs to networked communities (Jackson & Temperley). One of the most interesting and useful analyses in this book is provided by Andy Hargreaves, in his paper entitled "Sustainable professional learning communities." He argues that PLCs are at a crossroads, with their initial near-universal appeal being replaced by concerns as teachers become increasing coerced into so-called communities with increasingly narrow areas of focus, often literacy and math:

In recent years, as the idea and implementation of PLCs has spread, the result (as is common in many cases where innovations are scaled up) is that their original meaning is becoming diminished and their richness is being lost. The increasingly diluted and distorted character of professional communities is also being exacerbated by ideological and legislative emphases on only literacy and mathematics as the focus of improvement, and on tested achievement as the only way to measure it. (p. 183)

Hargreaves' argument is that PLCs can be powerful and productive, but that teachers cannot be coerced into structures and processes that are inappropriate to their needs. He argues for PLCs that are "less slick and stilted" (p. 184), and offers seven principles (depth, breadth, endurance, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, conservation) for developing more-sustainable learning communities. He argues that PLCs with such principles are "courageous and committed about putting learning before achievement, before testing, not vice versa" (p. 186). He states that the backbone of a successful PLC is trust, and references Bryk and Schneider's (2004) Chicago study which found that high-trust schools produced higher levels of student achievement than low-trust schools. Standing at the crossroads that he defines, Hargreaves argues for a renewal of PLC's core principles in order to redirect them in ways that renew teachers' energy by invigorating their collective learning, instead of depleting it by using PLCs as tools to implement "mandates from elsewhere" (p. 192). The seven principles in this chapter are explored in greater detail in Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) book, *Sustainable Leadership*.

In another chapter of the Stoll and Louis book, Milbrey McLaughlin identifies five challenges to developing secondary-school PLCs. "Structural impediments" include department and subject boundaries, and work structures. She also identifies "high-school leadership" with minimal modeling of inquiry, risk-taking, and professional learning, and a dominant secondary "professional culture" that identifies subjects rather than students as the core focus. In identifying "external contexts" as a challenge, McLaughlin discusses accountability systems and high-stakes testing as major challenges. Finally, she argues that "a pervasive culture of student disrespect for teachers" is a problem in generating teacher interest in PLCs, because such disrespect limits the strength of school communities. In spite of these challenges, some arguably more relevant in urban US schools than in Canadian schools, McLaughlin argues that evidence does exist of strong PLCs in some secondary schools, stating:

> The high school learning communities we studied were not merely 'doing reform,' they were 'doing high school differently.' Department boundaries softened or disappeared; teachers' practice became more student-centred—teaching something to somebody. Inquiry and evidence about practice grounded discussions about student learning and needed change. For these high schools, broadening leadership, situating professional learning within the school community, and developing improved uses of data and internal accountability systems were a product of, as well as necessary conditions for, changing the school's culture in ways that motivated and enabled professional learning communities to thrive. (p. 164)

Snow-Gerono (2005) collected data from teachers engaged in PLCs, finding two key shifts for teachers. The first was a shift from isolation to community, with greater access to other people in their professional lives:

> The teachers in this study also see people as absolutely necessary and integral to their cultivation of an inquiry stance. People help them create and sustain safe spaces for uncertainty and community where inquiry is natural and expected. (p. 247)

The second, and connected, shift was to uncertainty and appreciation for dialogue in collaboration:

> The teachers in this study also discussed collaboration and professional learning communities in terms of the creation of a 'safe' environment to question personal and public education practices and policy. With the support of people and a community, the teachers in this study recognize the impact that dialogue has on their ability to live an inquiry stance towards teaching, particularly when cultivated in a culture where uncertainty is valued and supported." (p. 249–250)

Snow-Gerono's work links to Coulter's (2002) discussion of encouraging teacher discourse in more public spaces when Coulter argued that:

> To engage in such discourses necessitates moving into a more public space, and teachers must be given the requisite conditions for this kind of communication. Teachers require privacy to prepare themselves for the task; they too need to try out new roles in safety, to form their own identity as educators. Teachers also need to recognize, however, that their roles are public concerns and that they have a responsibility to initiate and sustain public discussions about education and

teaching; they cannot remain in the comparative safety of their schools, their districts, their unions (or their universities). (p. 40)

Both Snow-Gerono and Coulter promote a view of collaboration and community that welcomes, engages, and challenges teacher participants. Their view is that groups, whether termed PLCs or Inquiry Groups, should initially offer some sense of safety, so that participants can reflect on issues that may perplex or trouble them. They argue that teachers in such groups can explore uncertainties if the culture of the group welcomes and supports the concept of uncertainty. But they also argue for such spaces to be extending and challenging spaces, and for teachers to go beyond the safety of the group to share their work in more public forums of discussion.

Achinstein (2002a) argued that with a decline of community in many western societies, schools are now expected to offer and foster community in schools, both among students and for teachers in the construction of professional learning communities. But she argues that those promoting community have "too rosy a conception of community" (p. 6), that they portray naïve, unified and uninformed images, and may disguise teachers' status in bureaucratic systems:

> Promoters of teacher professional communities would also have us believe they are all alike, yet sharp differences arise between professional communities founded on divergent ideologies, beliefs and norms. One community may promote social justice while another reinforces the status quo. These different ideologies matter in how schooling is enacted and for what ends. (p. 8)

The utility of Achinstein's work is primarily in terms of linking the concept of private and public to the nature of teachers' professional communities. She argues that conflict in such communities is as likely a norm as collaboration, and that the key to successful community is how the community deals with divergent and sometimes opposing views. She describes some communities that simply ostracize or exclude people with views divergent from a controlling norm, and others which welcome diversity of perspectives as contributing to understanding. Her argument, in a separate paper (Achinstein, 2002b), is that the latter are of greater utility in developing teacher learning because they incorporate a richer and more inclusive debate:

> The study challenges current thinking on community by showing that conflict is not only central to community, but how teachers manage conflicts, whether they suppress or embrace their differences, defines the community borders and ultimately the potential for organizational learning and change. (p. 421)

There appears to be an emerging dichotomy in the PLC literature, one that is fundamental for teacher unions to consider. On one side is the marketed approach of DuFour, with Andy Hargreaves providing a counter to DuFour and a different view of PLCs. The DuFour version appears to be increasingly prescriptive, which was referenced in the first section of this paper. DuFour is aided and abetted by Michael Fullan (2006), who has argued:

> The gold standard for fostering the development of PLCs comes from the activist work of Richard DuFour and his colleagues. Their latest offering, 'Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Building Professional Learning Communities,' is a powerful contribution to the field. Having led the development of PLCs in both elementary and secondary schools and now being associated with pockets of successful examples across all levels, DuFour essentially sets out to take all the excuses off the table for policymakers and practitioners alike. (p. 12)

DuFour's work is one aspect of PLC work and development, but is one that I would argue does not reflect a gold standard because of the controlling and prescriptive nature of PLC that they propose. "Removing all the excuses" for practitioners implies that practitioners may evade the "gospel" of PLCs as preached by DuFour, and that if they comply with the prescribed approached to PLCs, then they will succeed as a community. This reflects an arrogance and a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of community. Forced, mandated "communities" require compliance to norms established outside the community. Such norms hardly encourage discourse about uncertainty, or build safe spaces for teachers, and are increasingly being resisted.

A new and ominous word has appeared in some areas of the literature to reflect such compliance: fidelity. "Fidelity" is a term used to force compliance from teachers by districts and states mandating approaches to education. In some jurisdictions, fidelity is demanded with severe repercussions for teachers who fail to comply. In a recent study, Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) chillingly describe how some US school districts have demanded "fidelity" to district mandates which implement the "Open Court" reading program. "Fidelity'" essentially means compliance, with no dissent tolerated and no alternative approach to teaching reading and developing literacy allowed. They describe how every teacher in a district was expected to teach the same program in the same way at the same time. Two new teachers, both positively evaluated, and achieving excellent student outcomes, argued that Open Court approaches did not meet the needs of their students, and taught reading in ways that in their views did meet student needs. One was fired and the other resigned and moved to a district that did not use Open Court:

> Thus teachers who question state-authorized and district-adopted programs are deemed 'resistant' and deviant, and are pushed out of the profession or compelled to leave the school. Use of the term 'fidelity' to characterize adherence to the literacy program suggests that dissent is an expression of 'infidelity.' Instructional policy environments that define professionalism in terms of fidelity and, thus, infidelity, do not leave room for dissent and disagreement. (Achinstein & Ogawa, p. 56)

Similarly, Wilhelm (2006) describe how teachers in some schools are required "to fully implement 'with fidelity' the standards-based, state-approved curricular materials" (p. 29), later stating that the use of any other materials "compromises the program design" (p. 30). Wilhelm considers such an approach valid, while Achinstein and Ogawa challenge its ethos.

Another challenge to DuFour's approach was made by Servage (2006–07):

> The popular Professional Learning Community model presented by Rick DuFour and Roger Eaker acknowledges that the establishment of a sustainable culture of collaboration is a complex undertaking. However, the linear representation of the model may unwittingly lead practitioners to view the PLC 'building' as a stepwise process. The first 'step' advocated is the clarification of a school's vision, mission, values and goals. Presumably, once staff members have come to consensus on these foundations, the collaborative work can begin.

> What the DuFour and Eaker model fails to capture is just how iterative or 'back and forth' the process really is. There is no straight line from setting goals to acting on them to achieving them. Rather, technical work toward improved practice—if teachers take the time to reflect on it—should be fodder for continuing conversation about the beliefs and values that have guided past actions and will motivate future ones. Rather than focusing all initial efforts on pinning

down a mission statement, we need to allow teachers' sense of purpose to evolve from their collaborative work. (p. 36)

Servage makes a case for the need for collaboration and conversation among teachers in community, rather than adherence to a linear and arguably illogical process. She suggests that a school's "core values and culture are a work in progress," and will likely evolve through the discourse, rather than pre-defining it. While arguing that teachers should be given ownership of their collaborative time, she also urges the posing of questions with no easy answers.

Servage and Coulter offer both support for and a fundamental challenge to teachers. The support is in terms of providing time for reflective discussion in community, and teacher ownership of that time. The challenge is in the nature of the discourse. They argue that teachers have a responsibility that "their roles are public concerns and that they have a responsibility to initiate and sustain public discussion about education and teaching" (Coulter), and that teachers in such groups should "encourage the sorts of dialogue that challenge core beliefs" (Servage). It is likely the challenge that some teacher unions may have difficulties accepting, yet I would argue that it is one worth accepting. Similarly, the control of PLCs by teachers is likely a challenge that some school districts may not be willing to accept, and I would similarly argue that they should do so. Challenges in PLCs are initially internal to the group, offered and received in constructive ways, encouraging reflection on practices and beliefs. They can also extend beyond the group through reporting and presenting of a group's work. It is the nature of successful discourse to extend one's thinking through dialogue and challenge, to consider the nature and practices of teaching and learning, and then to link these to educative ends. School districts with an interest in learning communities should reconsider controlling or mandating forms of communities and instead establish processes which enable groups to form and engage in critical discourse. They need not look too far for such examples—the "Learning Teams" approach used in School District #43, Coquitlam, offers one such example. The district's 2006–07 Performance Plan[4] states:

> Learning Teams are small groups of educators that meet to engage in a professional growth inquiry-based experience focused on improving instructional practice and student learning. Learning Teams are facilitated by leaders who have expertise in the focus of the inquiry, and the skill of facilitation. For the 2006/07 school year, over 70 Learning Teams, inclusive of over 400 educators, are meeting to improve instructional practice.

Coquitlam's Learning Teams reflect an effective combination of district ethos and support. The district's ethos includes a level of trust that teachers engaging in Learning Teams are focusing on teaching and learning in ways that benefit both teachers and students. Providing some release time and facilitation reflects practical district support. That over 400 teachers have engaged in Learning Teams is a testimony to the appeal of this form of community—engaging but not forced, supported but not controlled.

Coquitlam's approach not only engages individual teachers in teams but offers systemic support for a culture of collaborative inquiry. It may also contribute to developing teacher efficacy, defined by Ross and Gray (2006) as "a specific belief in collective capacity" (p. 182). The Ross and Gray paper refers mainly to collective teacher efficacy in particular schools rather than across a district, and they offer substantial research evidence that "schools with high collective

---

[4] http://www.sd43.bc.ca/files/File/public/General_Info/Goals%20and%20Objectives/Performance%20Plan/2006_07 PerformancePlan.pdf

teacher efficacy have higher student achievement than schools with lower levels of collective teacher efficacy" (p. 183). However, it is possible to argue that building collective efficacy might also be achieved through collaborative groups, including PLCs. Ross and Gray's work argues that the collective and the collaborative is more powerful than the individual, and that collective teacher efficacy is more powerful than individual teacher efficacy. This connects to an argument referenced by Hargreaves (2007), linking "high-trust" schools to high levels of student achievement.

Coquitlam's approach reinforces an implicit belief that teachers' knowledge is crucial to developing learning communities, a concept stressed by Lieberman (2007):

> The professional learning communities described in the last few decades, frame the problem of learning and improving by starting where the learners are and rooting early discussions in going public with their practice. This idea is critical. The message is that what you know is important. Learning more can come from peers, research or knowledge that is generated together, but the starting point is one's own practice. This not only serves to dignify the participants' work, but it opens them up to their peers, and to knowledge from others outside their context. (p. 200–201)

The literature on leadership in PLCs or collaborative inquiry groups strongly suggests a move away from charismatic individual leaders towards both distributed leadership, and leadership of a different kind. Katz and Earl (2006) referenced Allen and Cherrey's (2000) view of distributed leadership:

> Leadership in organic systems is not the kind of leadership that one person can do. It is leadership that requires many people—a leader-full organization. It is an organic system, one person cannot control the system, nor can one person fully understand it. Therefore models of collaborative, shared or multi-level leadership become more important and critical in organic organizations. Developing the capacities of others becomes essential in building a leader-full organization. (p. 96).

The notion of distributed and facilitative leadership is not new. Lieberman and Grolnick (1997) concluded that:

> Our look across networks helps us to understand their strong contextual nature, their infinite variety of purpose and character, and their similar organizational tensions. Regardless of their individual differences, they appear to have in common the ways in which they bring people together and organize their work: agendas that are more often challenging than prescriptive; learning that is more indirect than direct; formats for work more collaborative than individualistic; attempts at change more integrated than fragmented; approaches to leadership more facilitative than directive. (p. 213)

One of the most powerful descriptions of leadership applied in educational settings was stated by Jackson and Payne (2002), quoted in Rhodes et al. (2004), and might well form the ideal of teacher leadership within collaborative inquiry groups:

> In the literature from the 'learning organizations field,' it is viewed that leaders are stimulators (who get things started); they are story tellers (to encourage dialogue and aid understanding); they are networkers and problem solvers too.

10

They tend to value a wider social repertoire than has been customary in hierarchical educational settings, in order to encourage openness and to foster and support relationships during times when members are wrestling with ambiguity. They will build trust. They will model improvisation and be comfortable with risk-taking and spontaneity. They will also care, deeply, about teachers and about children and about education because that is the source of emotional energy for others. Intriguingly they will be less personally ambitious, perhaps a long time in post, and will instead be remorseless about improvement. As leaders, they will place priority on the school as a context for adult learning. They will support staff at all levels to be able to make more sense of and interpret the emerging circumstances of school improvement. (p. 115)

Similarly, from the business literature, Linden (2003) explores the notion of collaborative leadership that he argues is becoming more relevant in work environments with flattened hierarchies and increased use of information technology. He offers ideas for collaborative leaders that build relationships and capacity while avoiding individual credit. His concept is the capacity and growth of the group rather than that of the individual. But he also articulates four key qualities of effective, collaborative leaders:

– tremendous persistence and energy and resolve with limited egos;

– passion about the outcome which attracts others, but 'because the passion is about the outcome and not about their resume, they tend to build trust and goodwill';

– ability to pull (encourage, invite) rather than push (order or pressure), in part because they have no formal hierarchical authority;

– capacity to think systemically, understanding interconnections in complex systems and how other organizations work.

The idea of teacher leadership is not new, but it has largely disappeared from many areas of systemic change as governments increasingly mandate approaches and curriculum, requiring more teacher compliance than leadership. Bullough (2007), in discussing the 'Eight-Year Study' referenced at the start of this paper, stated:

Leadership in this study was widely shared, and teachers, often for the first time, received significant responsibilities for determining the aims as well as the means of education. The more experimental programs involved teachers in virtually every educational decision of consequence. (p. 175)

Professional Learning Communities can develop forms of facilitative and distributed leadership, or they can be directed and controlled. But there is little doubt that a considerable body of both educational and business literature (OECD, 2004, 2003, 2001; Linden, 2003; Wallace, 2004) supports the concepts of facilitative and distributed leadership. Teacher unions might build on this body of literature to support the development of those forms of learning communities that encourage and develop both forms of leadership, thereby supporting teachers to become leaders and/or facilitators in such communities.

Discussion and implications for teacher unions

There appear to be trends in educational change which have a limited shelf life. They at first seem to have some utility for supporting teachers, schools, and school districts in their efforts to improve students' learning. One such trend was the "effective schools" movement, now largely of historical rather than topical interest. Such trends attract a critical mass of proponents, some of whom make comfortable livings out of articulating concepts and offering workshops in building effectiveness, or, in the case of PLCs, community. In their early iterations they extend constructive thinking and generate discussion, often providing useful supports for education systems looking for ways to better-educate students.

The effective-schools movement proposed seven correlates of "effectiveness": strong leadership, clear and focused mission, climate of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn/student time-on-task, and positive home-school relations. These correlates now appear as truisms, or as such minimal common-sense that they hardly require articulation. Which school and system would argue against the frequent monitoring of student progress? Which school does not seek positive home-school relations? The key point is that the effective-schools movement, and the latest "flavour of the month," professional learning communities, have taken common-sense concepts, turned them into "mantras," and shifted from opening up thinking to developing marketed approaches which increasingly require compliance. Requiring compliance has two consequences. The first is that if PLCs fail, the proponents of PLCs may claim that failure is a consequence of non-compliance, or "infidelity." The second is that in order not to fail, schools and school districts require instruction and training on how to comply, on how to be a "real" PLC. Thus, PLCs are increasingly marketed and sold, implying some form of ownership and control by those who market them.

Such examples of PLCs which are narrowly defined, and which require compliance, are illustrative of the forms of community that I would argue are not needed in education systems today. What is needed is promotion of a different notion of learning communities and collaborative inquiry, with the sharing of ideas about structures and processes which can be adapted to different contexts of schooling and systems. Teachers need to be encouraged and welcomed into forms of collaboration and community that are built on trust, that offer approaches which engage them, and that contain processes over which they have some control. Thus the concept of community might better be fitted around the needs of teachers rather than fitting them into a model where compliance or "fidelity" is required. Many new forms of collaborative professional development are being developed, as discussed by Randi and Zeichner (2004). New forms of teacher and distributed leadership are emerging within such collaborations (OECD, 2003), challenging the notion of charismatic and hierarchical leadership. There is much to learn and to share as educators build such communities. But in terms of PLCs, where mandated, controlled, and marketed, it's an idea whose time has gone.

However, teacher unions should be cautious in their opposition to PLCs. Some teacher unions, including the BCTF, have become more reactive than pro-active organizations, critiquing much while constructing little in support of teachers' professional development and growth. This was explored in an earlier BCTF paper, *Developing pro-active research roles for teacher unions*[5]*,* in which I argued that teacher unions might recognize complexity and avoid simplistic reactions to proposals that might include PLCs. In this paper, I argue that teacher unions need to focus more

---

[5] http://bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=5620

on construction than critique. Teacher unions, as demonstrated in Alberta, can play constructive roles in building PLCs which interest and attract teachers. In BC, where the BCTF has effectively been isolated by the government and its Ministry of Education, opportunities still exist to build collaborations with school districts, as shown in Coquitlam and in recent BCTF Research partnerships with Nanaimo-Ladysmith and Prince George[6] school districts. There also exists the capacity and potential for the BCTF and its locals to build and encourage collaborative professional development groups, whether PLCs or Inquiry Groups, through accessing local PD funds and building support through facilitation, funding, staffing, networking and publication of teachers' inquiry narratives and reports. A BCTF Working Group on Teacher Inquiry has been formed to consider the union's approach to collaborative inquiry, and whether it might offer a focus for the BCTF's professional development initiatives. The working group consists of representatives from the BCTF Executive Committee, and from among local presidents and local Professional Development chairpersons, several BCTF committees, and BCTF staff, and will report to the Executive Committee in 2008.

If the BCTF and its locals fail to develop alternatives, many BCTF members will continue to opt in to forms of collaborative professional development which are offered by quasi-provincial bodies which are funded by the provincial government. A current example involves the Network of Performance-Based Schools (NPBS)[7], through which many teachers are engaging in some form of collaboration and community. The network promotes a wide range of collaborative PD and networking, seminars, and conferences involving schools across the province. They also promote and provide examples of distributed leadership[8]. The NPBS is largely defining and controlling much of what exists in terms of collaboration and networking in BC's K–12 system, and is attracting a considerable number of teachers across BC. The point here is not to critique the NPBS but to point out that the BCTF has no connection to this or any other provincial professional collaborations or networking. Thus the union is being further marginalized and isolated while its members find their "professional focus" elsewhere. This situation can and should be changed.

A case can be made that the BCTF does not have a clear articulation of its professional focus, other than that it professes to have one. It is possible to develop the BCTF as a key player in facilitating and expanding teacher inquiry—one form of professional community—as professional development for teachers. The BCTF's provincial focus might also enable it to develop inquiry-oriented networks across the province. The concept is simple, but to build capacity in this area there needs to be sustained and substantial investment by the BCTF.

The BCTF can support teacher inquiry and networking by:

- recognizing a broad scope of activities as teacher inquiry, including action research, book study groups, and subject or job focused inquiry;

- providing training for facilitators and building cohorts of experienced facilitators across the province;

- providing seed funding for teacher inquiry projects, and accessing district PD funds;

---

[6] http://www.bctf.ca/diversity/BC-projects/MentoringOverview.pdf
[7] http://www.npbs.ca/
[8] http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/staff/teaching-research/alma_harris/distributed_leadership/

13

- publishing the work of BC teacher researchers through the BCTF web site and presenting union-initiated inquiry at conferences;

- building BCTF and locals' staff capacity to develop and facilitate teacher inquiry;

- promoting teacher inquiry through the PSAs;

- building networks to support teacher inquiry as a form of professional development;

- collaborating with school districts and university faculty to develop teacher inquiry;

- building a web page to support BC teachers' inquiry.

Why should the BCTF support teacher inquiry as professional development and as one form of learning community?

- It would clearly articulate one area of professional focus while maximizing the range of PD activities available to teachers.

- It builds teacher autonomy and teacher leadership.

- It challenges the idea that central mandates and accountability processes control teachers' professional lives.

- It will have significant appeal to the many new teachers entering teaching in BC in the coming years, and would enhance their view of the BCTF as a "union of professionals."

- It places the union as a creator rather than a critic of options for teachers.

- With a five-year contract in place, there exists a strong case that now is the time to shift internal resources to build professional capacity.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed some of the more-recent literature on Professional Learning Communities, and found evidence of a growing dichotomy between forms of PLCs—those which appear coerced, and those which both support and challenge teachers in environments of trust. There exists significant evidence for building and supporting the latter.

Teacher unions, long-standing critics of coerced forms of professional development, might usefully shift their primary professional development focus from critique to construction in order to build forms of PLCs that are attractive and useful to teachers. In the province of British Columbia, there will be many new teachers entering the profession in the coming years, as many veteran BC teachers retire. Such demographic change, along with some stability in terms of collective bargaining and agreements, offers an opportunity for the BCTF to consider shifting resources from campaigns and bargaining toward a greater investment in a range of professional-development approaches and infrastructure. Professional Learning Communities in this and other provinces can be shaped and influenced by those teacher unions willing to engage in their development.

Charlie Naylor,
BCTF Research

References

Achinstein, B. (2002). *Conflict amid community: The micropolitics of teacher collaboration.* Teachers' College Record.

Achinstein, B. (2002). *Community, diversity, and conflict among schoolteachers: The ties that bind.* New York: Teachers' College Press, Columbia University.

Achinstein, B. & Ogawa, R.T. (2006). (In) Fidelity: What the resistance of new teachers reveals about professional principles and prescriptive educardian policies. *Harvard Educational Review*, *76*(1), 30-63.

Bolam, R., Stoll, L., & Greenwood, A. (2007). The involvement of support staff in professional learning communities. In Stoll, L., Louis, K.L, eds. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill-Open University Press.

Bullough, R.V. (2007). Professional learning communities and the eight year study. *Educational Horizons*, Spring, 168–180.

Copland, M.A., & Knapp, M. (2006). *Connecting leadership with learning: A framework for reflection, planning, and action*. Alexandria: ASCD.

Coulter, D. (2002). Creating common and uncommon worlds: Using discourse ethics to decide private and public in classrooms. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 34*(1), 25-42.

Dewey, J. (1929). *The sources of a science of education.* New York: Horace Liveright.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & DuFour, R., eds. (2005). *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Erickson, G. (2007). *Professional learning communities: A multi-case study in three countries*. Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) research proposal. Vancouver, BC: UBC.

Fullan, M. (2006). Leading professional learning. *School Administrator*, *63*(10), 10-14.

Hargreaves, A. (2007). Sustainable professional learning communities. In Stoll, L., & Louis, K.L, eds. *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill–Open University Press.

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hargreaves, A. (2003). *Teaching in the knowledge society: Education in the age of insecurity*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

InPraxis (2006). *Professional learning communities: An exploration*. Alberta Education. http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/K_12/special/aisi/pdfs/Prof_Learng_Communities_2006.pdf

Jackson, D., & Payne, G. (2002). *The headteacher–guardian of leverage for school improvement.* Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership.

Jackson, D., & Temperley, J. (2007). From professional learning community to networked learning community. In Stoll, L., & Louis, K.L, eds. *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill-Open University Press.

Katz, S., Earl, L. (2006/07). Creating new knowledge: Evaluating networked learning communities. *Education Canada*, *47*(1), 34–37.

Lieberman, A. (2007). Professional learning communities: A reflection. In Stoll, L., & Louis, K.L, eds. *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill–Open University Press.

Linden, R. (2003). The discipline of collaboration. *Leader to Leader, 29* (Summer). Retrieved June, 15, 2006, from http://www.pfdf.org/knowledgecenter/L2L/summer2003/linden.html.

McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J.E. (2007). Building professional learning communities in high schools: Challenges and promising practices. In Stoll, L., & Louis, K.L, eds. *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill–Open University Press.

Naylor, C. (2005). *A teacher union's collaborative research agenda and strategies: One way forward for Canadian teacher unions in supporting teachers' Professional Development?* Vancouver: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.

OECD. (2003). *Schooling for tomorrow. Networks of innovation: Managing new models for managing schools and systems.* Paris: OECD.

Randi, J., & Zeichner, K. (2004). New visions of teacher professional development. In M.A. Smylie, & D. Miretzky, eds. *Developing the teacher workforce: 103rd yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Part 1.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rhodes, C., Stokes, M., & Hampton, G. (2004). *A practical guide to mentoring, coaching and peer-networking: Teacher professional development in schools and colleges.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Ross, G. (2006). Transformational leadership and teacher commitment to organizational values: The mediating effects of collective teacher efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *17*(2), 179–199.

Ross, J.A., & Gray, P. (2006). School leadership and student achievement: The mediating effects of teacher beliefs. *Canadian Journal of Education, 29*(3), p. 798–822. From http://www.csse.ca/CJE/Articles/FullText/CJE29-3/CJE29-3-Ross&Gray.pdf.

Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner.* London: Temple Smith.

Servage, L. (2006–07). Making space for critical reflection in professional learning communities. *Education Canada*, *47*(1), 14–18.

Snow-Gerono, J.L. (2005). Professional development in a culture of inquiry: PDS teachers identify the benefits of professional learning communities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 241–256.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development.* London: Heinemann.

Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7, 221–258.

Stoll, L., & Louis, K.L, eds. (2007). *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill–Open University Press.

Toole, J., & Louis, K.S. (2002). The role of professional learning communities in international education. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (eds.). *The second international handbook of educational leadership and administration* (245–279). Dordecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Wallace, R.L. (2004). *Strategic partnerships: An entrepreneur's guide to joint ventures and alliances.* Chicago, IL: Dearborn.

Wilhelm, T. (2006). Professional learning communities for schools in sanctions. *Leadership, 36*(1). 28–33.

CN:af:tfeu