

Article Review #2

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Article

Leonard, L. J. (2002). *Schools as Professional Communities: Addressing the Collaborative Challenge*. International Electronic Journal For Leadership in Learning, 6(17). Retrieved May 22, 2003 from <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~iejll/volume6/leonard.html>

Preface

Traditional professional development has not necessarily been incorporated in practice. This is unfortunate because as teachers, we are also learners. Learning is usually best put into place when it is incorporated into practice. When this occurs, it also results in improvement in the classroom. The current reform in many educational jurisdictions is to incorporate professional development so that it is part of the school culture. This practice builds towards a common school's vision and supports teaching and learning practices of everyone involve. The power of collaboration should not be overlooked, as schools tend to look for outside expert help without realizing what is already being practiced within the school.

Article Description

Leonard (2002) begins his paper by looking at literature on teacher collaborative practices. He notes that practitioners, administrators, and policy makers at all levels of public education are continually challenged to devise more effective ways to optimize teacher performance and thereby teacher achievement (Leonard, 2002, p2).

Consequently, schools and school districts are working more toward a collegial environment and developing professional learning communities. Organizational theory shows that there has been a “strong dissatisfaction placed upon the creative interaction by the traditional forms of bureaucratic organization” (Leonard, 2002, p2). In fact, the most effective leaders of the post modern era are considered to be those who do not rely upon

the legitimacy of their position, but rather utilize mechanisms of high participant involvement (Lawler, 1986; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994, in Leonard, 2002, p2).

The nature of the school culture plays an important role in school improvement. The school culture “addresses aspects of shared decision making (SDM), teacher accountability, the impact of the trust factor, democratic principles, the moral dimension, and the ability to bring about organizational change” (Leonard, 2002, p2). The basic assumption is that teacher beliefs and attitudes about the inherent worth of collaborative practice may have a significant impact upon any attempts to successfully establish professional learning environments (Leonard, 2002, p4).

A questionnaire of fifty-two items was distributed to five hundred randomly selected teachers in eighty-eight schools in ten public school districts in Northern Louisiana. Permission to use the teachers in the study was obtained from each of the ten districts. Of the five hundred questionnaires mailed out, two hundred thirty eight were returned. In the current climate of accountability and standards based assessment, the results showed “strong support for the statement which suggests that students do better on standardized tests when their teachers are regularly involved in professional collaboration” (Leonard, 2002, p6). Teachers indicated that it was highly desirable to have collaborative practice; however, it was noted that they were unlikely to engage in such practice if there was insufficient support or opportunities to do so. Lower grade schools as well as mid-sized schools were most likely characterized as collaborative in nature (Leonard, 2002, p10). This is attributed to the culture of the school as both lower

grade schools and mid-sized schools have common planning periods where collaboration can take place during school hours (Leonard, 2002, p10).

The second major findings in the study was that fundraising and extracurricular activities placed second and third for those who considered them regular forms of teacher collaboration. Most literature addressing professional collaborative practices do not consider them to be collaborative in its purest sense. Even though these activities do take up a considerable amount of time from teachers, literature does not consider these practices to enhance professional learning communities. For the purpose of this study, joint work of any level whether “it applies directly to teaching and learning and those that pertain more to collegial involvement” are considered to be collaborative in nature (Leonard, 2002, p12). However, the author acknowledges that if teachers are “truly expected to commit considerable time beyond their regular teaching responsibilities to engage in professional collaborative involvement then they should approach it from a position of priority not one of secondary consideration” (Leonard, 2002, p12). For policy makers and administrators, this acknowledges that both time and energy are needed in the development in professional learning communities.

Reaction

Much has been written about collaboration. Even in the business world, we do not have to look far to see that it values knowledge sharing. This type of practice is a model for improvement. For schools to remain stagnant over time has many negative effects to morale and productivity. Collaborative practices have shown to be effective in classroom and in learning.

This article was chosen for its practicality. Even though it was conducted in the United States, the paper is reflective of the findings of similar studies in a Canadian

jurisdiction (Leonard & Leonard, 2001 in Leonard, 2000). My school district is currently proposing changes to how professional development is undertaken. The administration and the professional development representative are looking for ways for teachers to work together, share best practices, and create professional learning communities (Pro-D discussion paper, 2003, p. 2). The one shot fits all approach has not worked since the context of each school is different.

In a recent staff meeting, the staff came up with terms that illustrated what we felt is effective professional development. The terms that came out were: take ownership, self directed, action research, time to reflect, practical, personal growth, fun, shared visioning, collaborative, collegial, meaningful, supportive, and create professional resources. The questions that came out were:

- What will your focus be?
- How will you form learning teams?
- How will you decide on a plan?
- How will you monitor the data?
- How will you report the data?

This type of collaboration was what this article was referring to. As Peter Senge (2002) notes, “Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where the rubber meets the road; unless teams learn, the organizations cannot learn. It is when teams are truly learning, do they not only produce extraordinary results, but individual members are growing rapidly than could have occurred otherwise”.

Journal Description

This article was retrieved from the International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning (IEJLL) located at the University of Calgary. It contains topics relating to

current leadership issues. Its editorial panel consists of two editors, one review editor, and three regional editors. It is a peer-reviewed journal that has certain criteria for publication. The publication asks for papers that are no longer than 5000 words following the APA format. The IEJLL is an electronic journal that has been online since 1997 with a volume published yearly. Each volume contains between six and twenty-five issues. This is one of my favourite online journals because many of the authors are recognizable as part of the faculty my graduate degree program. Through this medium, I am able to see what their research interests are as well as their current published work.

References

Pro-D Discussion Paper – The Power of Collaboration. (2003). West Vancouver, British Columbia: West Vancouver School District #45.