
Introduction

THE CALL FOR PLCs

In September 1980, the year I began my teaching career, I arrived early on the first day at Sorrinton¹ High School, a public high school in the greater Hartford, Connecticut, area, for the first day of a two-day staff in-service. I don't recall any new teacher orientation in-service, as is customary now. Everybody showed up a mere two days before the students came. After the usual barrage of welcomes, announcements of weddings and new babies, introduction of new staff (which included me, a then baby-faced 21-year-old), OSHA film clips, insurance and benefits meetings, and such, I met individually with my immediate supervisor, Agnes Zorba,¹ who was the chairperson of the math department. During that meeting with Ms. Z (as the staff and students called her), I remember her handing me an Algebra 2 textbook and starting a conversation that went something like this:

Ms. Z: We cover Chapters 1–8, all of Chapter 9 except the last section, sections 10.1 and 10.2, all of Chapter 11 and, if you get to it, sections 12.1–12.3.

Me: Uh, okay.

Ms. Z: We're short one Teacher's Edition, but I've ordered one for you. Until it arrives, you'll have to work all the problems you assign for homework. You should do that anyway, just to be sure you know what's in store when you go over homework each day.

Me: Okay. I'll do that.

Ms. Z: And, as you map out the year tonight and tomorrow night, keep in mind that they have trouble with logs so allow a few extra days on that. I usually supplement logs with extra practice from other texts.

1. A pseudonym.

2 The Practice of Authentic PLCs

Me: Logs. Okay. Will do. Anything else I should know?

Ms. Z: Well, your sixth period class is a little large—I think 39 kids—so you'll have to run a tight ship. The Bartucci¹ twins are in that section.

Me: The Bartucci twins. Okay. Thanks for the heads-up.

And that was it. How I made it through the next two dozen years of classroom teaching remains a mystery to me. By necessity, I had to learn to do things myself. I learned by failing. I learned what not to do. I learned that the trig chapter was just as hard for them as the log chapter. I learned the hard way how the projects that I thought were so cool actually demonstrated very unsubstantial learning of my students. Why did I have to work in isolation? My seasoned colleagues already knew the lessons I learned on my own that first year. Why was there no mechanism in place for them to mentor me? How my learning curve could have shot up, more quickly, if there was a forum for me to learn from them and for them to also see fresh and new perspectives from me.

As Bob Dylan sang 16 years before that conversation occurred between Ms. Z and me, "Well, the times they are a-changin'" (Dylan, 2004). To be sure, teachers still work in isolation in significant part, but the closed classroom door of instruction is beginning to open. New teachers today often have their own in-service before the faculty at large returns from summer vacation, and many beginning teachers are assigned mentors to help them as they struggle during their first critical year. Even with such support, American public schools lose nearly half of their beginning teachers by their fifth year of teaching (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

Education in America is at a critical juncture. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the reading achievement of our 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds has flatlined in the past 20 years, with the scores for 17-year-olds actually dropping slightly in the past 10 years (NAEP, 2009b). Our math scores in these age groups have shown marginal increases but remain essentially unchanged (NAEP, 2009a). That would be disturbing enough, but the fact that this lack of improvement is happening in a context of an increasingly technological and complex world is worrisome. Global competitiveness in this flat world is no longer an advantage; it is a necessity for economic survival (Friedman, 2007).

As a nation, we are falling behind other first world countries in math and science. In fact, our best-performing states such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and North Dakota are significantly and consistently out-performed on standardized eighth-grade math and science tests by countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan. Our lowest performing states in math and science have standardized scores for eighth graders that are comparable to eighth graders

in developing countries such as Romania, Slovakia, and Estonia (NAEP, 2009a). As the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study reports, eighth graders in the United States ranked 11th and 12th, respectively, in science and math among some 20 first world countries (TIMSS, 2007).

On the home front, we can still boast having the best colleges, universities, and medical schools in the world; however, we would be well advised to end any such conversation there. Our public K–12 schools that prepare students for those exemplary postsecondary institutions are falling dreadfully short. Our public schools face enormous challenges never before realized to this current critical extent. Challenges such as teacher shortages in math and science, increasing numbers of students living in poverty, the prevalence and influence of gangs in school neighborhoods, the deluge of English language learners populating our schools, and crippling budget cuts all contribute to the mosaic of obstacles that retard reform initiatives and as a result, any real improvements in teaching and learning.

To say that schools need interdependent support among their faculties is an understatement. Nearly every other type of professional—architect, doctor, engineer, actuary, and lawyer—routinely practices within a team, so that the veterans and the apprentices both maximize the quality of their work. It's high time we do the same in education. There is so much wisdom present amidst a group of teachers sitting around a table discussing teaching and learning. How can we tap into it? How can we structure ourselves so that we might break down the walls of isolation and work together to improve what we do and increase the learning of our students? The answer lies in schools implementing effective, collaborative teams of teachers.

This book is about how schools can build and sustain authentic PLCs that center around the teachers themselves to develop the skills and culture in which effective, accountable team collaboration can occur. That's not to imply that PLCs are a panacea for all things not working in schools, but it does imply putting student learning and student success above all else. It means setting our teacher egos on a distant back burner and doing whatever it takes to provide the best educational experience for all kids. It means working together to take a hard look at what we do, to converse openly and honestly about our work, and the effect of our work, and it means deliberately *planning* to impact student learning.

By their very design, PLCs function in a manner consistent with this notion and are, as Mike Schmoker says, the “surest, fastest path to instructional improvement” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 106). If we step back and think about it in a commonsensical way, we quickly come to the realization that when we provide teachers the *time*, *tools*, and *power* to work together to *analyze* and *alter* their *collective* and *individual* teaching practices, their students invariably benefit.

Just because PLCs make good sense doesn't mean that doing them well is easy stuff. Indeed, even the fastest and surest design eventually boils down to hard work (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). It's not enough for schools to simply have PLCs; they must do them well. I wrote this book to inform school leaders about how to do PLCs well, so that the presence of authentic PLCs in any school can make a difference in how much and how well students learn.

OUT WITH PROGRAMS, IN WITH PEOPLE

Many school leaders and policymakers, often desperate to increase student achievement and to do so in the shortest possible amount of time, simply cannot resist the allure of adopting well-pitched programs to fix their schools' problems. Just ask any teacher who has been teaching in the same school for the past five years. Ask her to list all the programs and initiatives her school has adopted during those five years and then ask her which of these will be promoted financially and supported administratively for the upcoming school year. I have no doubt that the list will shrink considerably, as principals let last year's programs, once the end-all in solving student achievement problems, wither and die in favor of this year's next "good program" that these well-meaning principals oblige upon their weary faculties.

I see several reasons for this. First, it is a reflection of America's general obsession with consumerism. If something is broken, be it our dishwasher or a wayward teenage son, we invoke a knee-jerk desire to buy something that will fix it and make our headache (in the case of the dishwasher) or heartache (in the case of our troubled teen) go away.

Second, and this is quite possibly related to the first reason, schools are often in denial regarding the complexities of their problems and want—often desperately—to believe that the latest brand name initiative or program, once adapted, will nearly effortlessly solve the problem of low student achievement. As if it were that simple.

And third, we are drawn to any program that promises a quick fix. And though, in all my visits to schools I have never met a principal who did not care deeply for the students in her charge, principals' jobs are often on the line. Many believe they can't afford to wait a year or two to see significant gains in student achievement. Some insist they can't afford to do the messy and longer work of developing their faculties to become effective collaboration teams and exceptional classroom teachers when the latest brand *du jour* promises quick results that claim to be "teacher proof." It is my constant battle cry throughout this book that, truth be told, principals cannot afford to *not* do these things.

Doug Reeves, in his recent book, *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Results*, offers sensible and compelling arguments why most

programs are short-lived, far too plentiful in number, promote an acute lack of school focus, promote what he refers to as *Initiative Fatigue*, and just don't work in an undeniable majority of cases (Reeves, 2010):

When the software licenses expire, the three-ring binders are lost, and the training is long forgotten, teachers will continue to have students walk into the classroom. Administrators will continue to work with teachers who need support and encouragement. In these many moments of truth, it will be people and the professional practices they carry with them, not the brand names, that define success or failure. (Reeves, 2010, p. 44)

People, not programs, are at the apex of serious school improvement and they are the nexus of authentic PLCs. It is not about brand name programs—whether they are implemented “with fidelity”—that matter most. It's about using to the fullest extent the talent and wisdom of a collective, an existing faculty of teachers that can, with intense and sustained focus on a few important things, bring about the most significant change and improvements in student learning.

Lest I give the impression that all well-pitched, well-advertised programs are bad or otherwise ineffective, let me say this: Some are indeed very good; the results they boast are valid and noteworthy. But it all comes down to people—the teachers who would implement (or not) these “researched-based” programs. I endorse no program. What I do endorse are faculties of teachers working together on a few specific tasks that, when done well, stand to make an enormous difference in what teachers do, how they do it, and in what kids learn. Read on, dear reader. The rest of this book is about what to focus on and how to focus on those few important things.

But first, let us consider where PLCs originated, what they are and are not, and how doing them well requires a seismic shift in teacher culture.