

3rd World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership (WCLTA-2012)

Learning about being effective mentors: Professional learning communities and mentoring

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore experienced mentors' understandings about professional learning communities (PLCs), mentoring and leadership. This research analyses audio-taped transcripts and written responses from 27 experienced mentors who operate in varied roles (e.g., university academics, school executives, teachers, learning support personnel). Findings indicated that PLCs can provide professional renewal for existing teachers and that mentoring within PLCs can further advance knowledge about effective practices. PLCs can include other staff members and key stakeholders (e.g., preservice teachers, teacher aides) who can contribute to the learning within the group. Mentoring and PLCs can be cost-effective strategic levers for advancing professional knowledge.

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Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ferhan Odabaşı

Keywords: PLC; professional learning community; leadership; mentoring.

1. Introduction

Australia is undergoing substantial education change, particularly with the Australian Government financially supporting an "Educational Revolution". Such change requires the enactors of education reform (i.e., teachers and preservice teachers) to be engaged in purposeful pedagogical development that brings to fruition the vision of reform measures. Extending beyond conventional forms of professional development is the notion of establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) to advance mentoring practices. This study explores experienced mentors' understandings about PLCs, mentoring and leadership.

2. Literature review

In Australia, there is a push for mandatory hours of professional development for teachers in schools. For example, Queensland College of Teachers (2009) and NSW Institute of Teachers (2010) have teacher professional development as a requirement of renewing teacher registration. Professional development, instigated as a reaction to low student outcome data and as an attempt to upskill teachers to current practices, is a consistent recommendation within Australian education reviews (e.g., Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; Ramsey, 2000). Yet, conventional forms of professional development (e.g., one-off workshops and short-period teacher release initiatives) have limited or no lasting effects (Corcoran, 1995, cited in Google by 132 authors

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as at 15 December, 2010). It is argued that these band-aid measures make sustained professional learning difficult to achieve, let alone embed professional learning outcomes as a valuable way of working for teachers (Kelleher, 2003). Conventional forms of conceptualising and presenting professional development experiences for teachers must be reviewed, particularly for cost effectiveness, efficiency and success in terms of raising student outcomes (Corcoran, 1995; Kelleher, 2003). Similar to learning needs of students, authentic professional development must be at the forefront of teacher development (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Educators (Brady, 2010; Wilson & Berne, 1999) want changes in the activation of professional development for teachers. For example, Webster-Wright (2009) advocates a move from professional development to a holistic emphasis on learning. Easton (2008) also insists that school practitioners “must become learners, and they must be self-developing” (p. 756). Indeed, the Australian Government is encouraging teachers to build professional learning communities with participation in collaborative school projects (e.g., ASISTM grants; Association of the Independent Schools of the Northern Territory, 2010).

A professional learning community (PLC) “is a group of connected and engaged professionals who are responsible for driving change and improvement within, between and across schools that will directly benefit learners” (Harris & Jones, 2010, p.173). In understanding the nature of PLCs, they are generally regarded as forums for the common good that explore, refine, and embed practices to advance an organisation. Importantly, the bottom line for establishing PLCs in schools is the focus on improving student learning outcomes. This entails analysing current teaching practices and striving for ways that investigate potential practices to improve education. PLCs are used to gain new knowledge but this necessitates an understanding of how supportive linkages within the school occur for sustaining PLCs (Burge, Webber, Klinck, & Fullan, 2007). People learn from each other to develop effective practices and implementing models of learning such as Senge’s (1990) disciplines (e.g., creating a vision) that can help facilitate a community of learners (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Clarke (2009) also claims that supportive conditions are pivotal to successful PLCs. High-functioning PLCs “appear to have the capacity for learning, inquiry, change, and innovation” (Stoll, 2010, p. 157).

Unpacking effective PLC environments and operations can provide an indication on what may constitute successful PLC practices. Harris and Jones (2010) claim that PLCs can create professional networking and collaboration where people share a vision, purpose, and develop leadership abilities. These environments can enhance knowledge about effective practices with an impact on “teachers’ classroom work” (Stoll, 2010, p. 153). In addition, PLCs accept collective responsibility and can lead to implementing innovations that “raise collective and individual professional performance” (Harris & Jones, 2010, p. 173). According to Wood (2007), participation in PLCs arises out of authentic problem-solving contexts using agreed upon protocols to serve common interests. Wood claims that PLCs need to be reasonably small in membership number (i.e., five members compared to twenty) to work effectively. Hogan and Gopinathan (2008) also emphasise that apart from authentic learning and inquiry-directed research into teaching practices, PLC practices must be “iterative and extended over time and supported by follow-up activities including coaching and mentoring”; in addition, it needs to be “deprivatized, collaborative, and embedded in schools functioning as communities of learners and communities of inquiry” (p. 373). PLCs can operate as safe environments where people voice opinions, which provide a sense of connectedness; as Cooper (2009) states, “with the characteristics of sharing and common purpose, and interdependence but concern for individual opinions, communities provide connectedness for teachers, which is beyond the isolated classroom structures in school” (p. 14).

There are many benefits for all key stakeholders when PLCs operate successfully. Simply, the benefits of a PLC include developing a common purpose and re-defining practitioners’ work (Kaplan, 2008); yet other tangible benefits are apparent. For instance, Harris and Jones (2010) show that PLC members have higher morale, job satisfaction, and generally show lower absenteeism. They further state, “there is evidence of teachers having a greater commitment to making significant and lasting changes in their classroom and beyond that can contribute to systemic change” (p. 175). Part of the reason may be that teachers want to develop a “better understanding of themselves as practitioners” (Nielsen & Triggs, 2007, p. 178). In a school setting, the focused professional dialogue occurring in PLCs aims to explore best practice to improve student achievement. Hence, crucial to addressing reviews into education, PLCs have the potential to facilitate learning for practitioners that align with departmental and school visions.

Teachers must be empowered by school leaders to enact educational visions. Averso's study (2005) shows that effective leaders empower vision, model support, build coherence, and monitor progress. Harris and Jones (2010) say that "strong, supportive leadership is necessary to build and sustain professional learning communities" (p.179). However, Steven's (2007) suggests that leaders (e.g., principals) need to lead from behind so as not to dominate in a PLC and allow others to enact leadership roles. This brings forward the notion of distributed leadership with a shared inquiry to promote opportunities for multiple individuals to take up roles within the school (Harris, 2009). Teachers can "take on leadership roles in a PLC to move schools forward" (Clarke, 2009, p. 20). "Distributed leadership provides the infrastructure that holds the community together, as it is the collective work of educators, at multiple levels who are leading innovative work that creates and sustains successful professional learning communities" (Harris & Jones, 2010, p. 174). Distributed leadership may lead to shared leadership roles that form new collaborative relationships (Gronn, 2002; Stevens, 2007), which have been associated with changes in teaching performances (Harris & Jones, 2010). Another aspect of distributed leadership appears to be the self-activation of leadership roles in PLCs (Hudson, English, Dawes, & Macri, in press). However, others within a PLC may take on mentoring roles that assist in achieving the visionary directions of the group. PLCs that involve school staff operate with a teamwork approach; consequently staff members combine their expertise to address key issues.

Mentor teachers have roles to play in the development of preservice teachers; however some professional experiences are incorporating peer mentoring programs where preservice teachers form groups (or PLCs) to provide constructive feedback on teaching practices. "They have an important role in providing personal and professional support to each other" (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008, p. 1808). Another area of innovation for preservice teachers working in PLCs is the idea of co-reflection, where a community of reflecting peers respond to each other's reflections (Fund, 2010). Preservice teachers can be grouped together in professional experiences for the purposes of developing a PLC about teaching (e.g., Wray, 2007) and this can be further extended to include groups of mentors. Indeed, mentors can help to facilitate PLCs for preservice teacher involvement, particularly ethical and social responsibilities as well as intellectually scaffolding pedagogical advancements (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Establishing PLCs with mentors and mentees has the potential for promoting collaboration rather than working in isolation (Clarke, 2009). Stimulating reflective dialogue can assist mentors and mentees to seek and implement pedagogical insights. "The potential contribution such learning conversations can make to transforming the professional knowledge of both mentors and trainees" (Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 37). Stevens (2007) outlines research highlighting that PLCs improve student outcomes, especially as "extra knowledge" is gained "when everyone gets involved" (p. 106).

The research question was: What are experienced mentors' understandings about PLCs and mentoring?

3. Context

Although this study focuses on PLCs, mentoring, and leadership within school contexts, synergies will be highlighted that apply to contexts in other workplaces. The context for this study, however, involves 27 experienced mentors (including university academics, teachers, school executives and learning support personnel) who were involved in a three-day professional development program facilitated by the first two mentioned researchers. This professional development program was a result of a Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) grant to advance mentoring practices in Australian schools, particularly as mentors' reports on their own practices show considerable variation in quality and quantity (Hudson, 2010). Indeed, research (Hudson & Hudson, 2011) around a similar three-day program conducted earlier outlined that PLCs must have commitment to contextual needs and operate in a supportive forum where participants become co-learners for advancing their own practices. This research established the need for developing a common discourse for effective communication within PLCs and that PLCs can contribute to and generate leadership development; it recognised that transaction and transformative leadership strategies were considered far more favourable over *laissez-faire* approaches. An information-discussion-feedback-trialling model was presented to allow PLC participants opportunities for testing innovations; hence these PLCs can be cost-effective professional development.

The three-day program was organised and promoted as a professional learning community (PLC) where each member's opinions, experiences, knowledge and skills about PLCs and mentoring were recognised as valuable to the learning for the group. Each executive actively participated within a range of topics, for example: (1) Mentoring

and the mentor-mentee relationship, (2) School culture and infrastructure, (3) The five-factor mentoring model (i.e., personal attributes, system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modelling, and feedback; Hudson, 2010), (4) Problem solving and leadership, and (5) Action research for enhancing mentoring and leadership practices. The activities associated with each topic were designed to be interactive and utilised various teaching strategies to maximise participant collaborations. For instance, the teaching strategy “think, pair, share” was used for the question: “What may help facilitate a positive mentor-mentee relationship?” Participants were also placed in random groups for different activities to maximise networking and sharing of ideas. The sharing of knowledge and skills between participants was intended to develop common understandings, especially when the end of each session was summarised by the whole group.

The participants in this study included 26 females and 1 male with 18 of them aged between 30-49 years and 5 participants older than 50 years of age. Only 3 were between 22-29 years of age. All had mentored more than one preservice teacher previously, with 24 who claimed they had mentored 5 or more mentees. These experienced mentors incorporated 10 university academics, 8 teachers, 3 school executives, 5 behavioural support personnel, and one from a learning centre. Six participants had been employed in teaching between 6-10 years and 20 participants had worked in the education system for more than 10 years. There was only one participant who had worked in an education system for less than six years.

4. Data collection methods and analysis

This study aimed to explore experienced mentors’ understandings about PLCs and mentoring. Data were collected over a three-day period where all were involved in professional development on mentoring and leadership. This qualitative research used audio recorders for whole group discussions on topics and issues involving professional learning communities and also within smaller groups (i.e., 4-6 participants) at various points during the three-day program. Recorded dialogues were transcribed by an experienced research assistant (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). In addition, these mentors engaged with various intellectual materials that were used to facilitate discussions and later analysed for triangulation of data. For example, they were asked to write strategies that may facilitate personal attributes in the mentoring process (e.g., be supportive, demonstrate attentive listening, be comfortable with talking about teaching, instil confidence, instil positive attitudes, and assist others to reflect on practice). Each group had an audio recorder and graphic organisers to record their responses. All material was transcribed and collated within the discussion topics previously stated in the context of this study.

The mentors responded to open-ended questions, providing them with opportunities to interpret the question in their own way and allowing each individual to express opinions in relation to their experiences as participants in the mentoring program. Some questions requiring written responses aimed to establish a context, such as: What is your vision for enhancing teaching and learning in schools? What does mentoring mean to you? Other questions explored creative ideas about advancing mentoring within schools, for instance: How could mentoring be part of a professional learning community? How could preservice teachers be part of a PLC? In your opinion, what mentoring needs to occur to advance teaching and learning? The written responses were collated under common themes with excerpts taken from participant responses as examples that were considered representative of the theme (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). Audio-recorded interactions were analysed for additional information and contributed to the themes.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 PLCs as ways to enhance teaching and learning

The first question, requiring a written response, presented an opportunity to establish common understandings between the participants and gave an indication of their philosophical underpinnings for enhancing teaching and learning in schools. Four participants had a common view that a mentoring program for mentors needs to advance knowledge and practices with opportunities for sharing viewpoints about effective teaching practices. Eight participants emphasised sharing effective practices within a framework of a professional learning community (PLC). They noted the use of PLCs as having multiple purposes for example one participant said they wanted to “inspire

others (mentors) to have that passion for teaching and learning that I have”, yet another participant wanted teachers (mentors) to articulate effective practices by “vocalising their unconscious practice”. The notion of sharing practice requires commitment, resources and opportunity to become embedded in the everyday discourse for professional learning. The statement that reflects the most popular interpretation amongst the participants was that PLCs involved “collegial sharing of best practice and resource through a rich curriculum”. PLCs were noted as providing a forum for these sought after opportunities, where mentors can collectively discuss effective mentoring practices towards arriving at common understandings and also leading towards an effective education system, for example, one participant stated, “Instilling that passion so it’s about ensuring that we have a healthy workforce for the future. Very altruistic”.

Three participants had a vision for teaching and learning that recognised significant change in relation to: (1) the way university and schools work together, and (2) the transformational nature of lifelong learning in the context of learning, teaching and leadership. This first point can be interpreted as the need for universities to reach out into schools and the classroom settings where PLCs engage a wider range of key stakeholders. Further this notion can be posited in the broader notion of reciprocity between education institutions and the education system as they co-construct the teachers of the future. The second point draws a picture of the importance of ongoing professional learning and development as a vehicle for transformation of the profession. It was shown through the written responses, audio recordings and other materials engaged through the sessions, that the mentor has a direct role in championing this iterative professional renewal. Indeed, one participant claimed that working in a PLC reinvigorated professional renewal as she stated about her last PLC experience: “I just walked away feeling so excited again about the profession and what we’re trying to do”. Another participant focused on veteran teachers who can benefit from PLCs, for instance: “But also how this process ‘professional renewals’ for all staff like you were saying not just new teachers, but teachers that have been teaching for twenty, twenty-five, thirty years to touch base again and go back to basics”. It was emphasised that interactions within the mentoring relationship can provide a voice for a balanced and nurturing curriculum. For a classroom situation, there is usually one mentor and one mentee; however this can change to include two mentees on one class, particularly when they are in their first or second field experiences. The transformative nature of lifelong learning can also arise when a mentor engages the mentee with other staff members, though this was recognised as generally informal and random in nature. Nevertheless, it was claimed the more interactions and experiences a mentee receives, the greater the possibility of acquiring professional growth.

There were eight participants who responded about PLCs through the role of a teacher, as not surprisingly teachers hold the key for successful implementation of any vision for enhancing teaching and learning in schools. Four participants wrote about “intrinsic motivation” and “passion and enthusiasm” as ways in which teachers can involve themselves in PCLs. It seems reasonable to assume that intrinsic motivation for involvement in professional development might have more opportunities for success than teachers who are thrust into professional development unwillingly. Indeed, thrusting teachers into professional development may be viewed as a sign that teachers do not have the expertise, whereas forming a PLC for specific purposes tends to signify professional autonomy and respect for a profession who can self-directed their development. Two participants in this study highlighted the need for “genuine acknowledgement” of expertise and having “teachers as trusted professionals”. These participants identified mentoring as an avenue for professional development that acknowledges the expertise of professionals. This may result in the dual benefit of moving teachers into mentoring roles and projecting a positive status for the teaching profession.

5.2 What does mentoring mean to you?

It was considered important for participants to develop a common discourse for effective communication within this particular PLC. The participants highlighted consistently the need for mentors to “support” others, which needs to be anchored in professional performance or, in the words of one participant, being “the best we can be”. Ten of the participants used a variety of adjectives, verbs and nouns to clarify the type of support they coveted such as forming “relationships”, “sharing”, “guiding”, and being a “critical friend”. Three participants described the type of mentoring support they believed framed what mentoring meant to them: “explicit modelling”, “constructive helpful feedback” and “facilitate and nurture; critically self reflect”. The responses also emphasised the desire to learn in

their roles as mentors and teachers through observation and discussion. This can become a precursor to a more significant partnership based on trust, mutual respect and reciprocity. Seven participants identified professional growth for the mentee and mentor as important aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship.

One audio-recorded focus group highlighted the need for mentors to be receptive to learning, not producing teaching clones of themselves but rather sharing viewpoints with mentees and learning from what they can bring to the pedagogic discussion:

- P 3: And I think in our discussion it was about being open to learning yourself, so that sometimes you are not necessarily wanting to produce clones of your own styles. So yes, helping.
- P4: Well helping them to learn their style too isn't it 'cos we all have our own style.
- P1: Well I said as a mentor I like to share. I like our relationship to be not necessarily: 'I am in control, what I say goes' but perhaps a 'What's your point of view? You need to work on such and such. How do you think you could do this? Let's do it together'.
- P2: And also being open to that the person at university is actually in an environment where they're fresh to new ideas. Do you know what I mean? And so yes our practice is the stuff that's happening on the ground etc. and we all have knowledge and expertise but they are coming from a place where we can really gain skills from as well.
- P4: Yeah.
- P1: Yes. But they're another resource.
- P2: Exactly.
- P1: I love tapping resources (P4: Yeah, yeah.) regardless of where they are from.

Mentoring was not seen as a "one way street" but a reciprocated arrangement where both parties can learn from each other, as demonstrated by such statements as "learn from and guide practicum students [preservice teachers], see new ideas and get 'refreshed'" and "two-way learning, guidance, reflective feedback". These comments lead to a notion of developing a teacher identity emanating from the sharing of skills and growth in professional practices. Another participant discussion illustrated the groups' thoughts about mentors as guides who share reflective dialogues and internalise their own teaching practices for professional growth:

- P5: I've got mentor as that "guide on the side not the sage on the stage" that's kind of how I see it so and I guess my definition of mentoring reflects that. I think it's a partnership. I think it's an ability to share and reflect together. It's a two-way learning process. It's about guidance and reflective feedback both ways. So I see it as a really collaborative type thing as opposed to supervision which I see as a little bit differently.
- P6: And I like what you said about the learning together because I have found whenever I have prac students [preservice teachers] in my classroom, I learn so much about my own teaching.
- P5: It should be. Yeah, that's right.
- P6: But also I reflect a lot more on my teaching because I want to be able to share that.
- P5: Absolutely, that's right. Yes, and justify and yeah I always found that when I was supervising students as well. But yeah, I really will say umm professional development activity for me as well.
- P6: Yes. Definitely.
- P7: I found you became very critical of your own teaching style whilst you were teaching. And it was like 'Am I doing this the right way to get the right sort of knowledge across to what you want them to get out of it?' Like a very, I found that with my last prac student [preservice teacher] I was very mindful of how I was teaching while I was teaching as opposed to just getting up and doing it like you do every other day.
- P6: We talked about reflective practice, and really being very conscious of what it is that you are doing and reflecting on why it is that you are doing it.

5.3 PLCs and mentoring

Participants pinpointed PLCs as necessary structures in any school environment and an integral part of the professional responsibility of being a teacher. PLCs were deemed to be a “structural part of all schools, for all teachers”. Mentoring was also noted as having a key role within these PLCs. “Mentoring allows information and skills to be retained in the workforce” and “top/down priority given to this by the Principal...” are examples of participant comments that support this notion. The openness of co-educators sharing practices within PLCs was presented by one participant as: “learning is not secret teacher’s business”. Schmoker (2004) clearly outlines that significant and often immediate rewards in student learning and school professional morale can be obtained through structured teacher collaboration. Indeed, sharing practice is an essential element of school and system improvement. Nine participants prioritised the importance co-educator partnerships in order to continually learn and grow as professionals through ongoing PLCs that focus on an “exchange of all the positive values, beliefs and practices”. Interestingly there was not one participant who questioned the importance and potential value of mentoring and PLCs in the school setting. Nor was there any mention of PLCs as counterproductive processes towards a school improvement agenda or resistance to the perceived difficulties of implementing PLCs within the day-to-day business of teacher professionalism.

Participant comments were expressed as a way to expand the influence of mentoring to other employee groups in the school. Six participants placed importance on PLCs as a vehicle for reinforcing positive school culture, through inclusion of all school stakeholders in meaningful ways and the facilitation of collaborative groups. Fifteen participants took this notion of collaboration into the realm of teams, teaming and networks. These teams need not be confined to existing school staff but can embrace others in their formative stages of development. For instance, PLCs can incorporate preservice teachers; one participant wrote, “valuing their [preservice teachers] knowledge skills and passions... create space to create new ideas” and another responded “linking them with those who are passionate and open to sharing their skills, knowledge and expertise. Providing a network of support”. There was a voluntary aspect inferred when collaborating within PLCs, even at an initial stage where members can “self-elect to join a mentoring group”. Hence, a PLC can include various stakeholders (e.g., university staff, school executives, teachers, preservice teachers, teacher-aides) by providing a forum of mentorship to raise the standards of teaching and learning across the school.

5.4 Mentoring to advance teaching and learning

These participants ($n=27$) were fully-qualified teachers with experience in the field, yet they articulated that mentoring needs to be ongoing throughout a career for reflection and renewal. Eight participants placed high priority on embedding continuous mentoring practices for improving teaching and learning. It was inferred that teachers who take on mentoring roles can self-activate their lifelong learning in the profession. For example, one participant argued that “every practitioner needs to have a mentor role”. However, there was a potential contradiction evident in the data when one participant said “selection of the ‘best’ and ‘brightest’ teachers to mentor pre-service teachers”. It has been stated that mentoring “should be an intentional process” (Christensen, 1991, p. 12), with mentor and mentee wanting the mentoring process (Gehrke, 1988). Poor partnering may cost preservice teachers valuable career time (Coombe, 1989), which could also result in loss of self-esteem (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Some mentors and mentees may experience difficulty in working collaboratively, as the complexities of organising fully compatible partnerships have considerable chance built in as mentors and mentees are generally unknown to each other (Sherman, Voight, Tibbetts, Dobbins, Evans, & Weidler, 2000). Undoubtedly, preservice teachers require mentors who have expertise, yet it is also noted that the pool of quality mentors is limited and, consequently, more mentors need to be enlisted into effective mentoring processes (Hudson, 2010).

Efficient use of a mentor’s time presented as one of the key issues for providing quality mentoring. Participants highlighted: time allocations per week (how much time a teacher has available to mentor a beginning teacher in the working week), time as duration of the initiative (might be bounded as one term, one semester or one year), time as the length of one’s career and time as the duration of the schooling enterprise (a permanent addition to the core business of schools). The time commitment required of mentors is high, especially for those mentees who require more assistance than others, which can be an additional burden to the mentor (Long, 1997). This is precisely a

reason for planning mentor-mentee interactions, so that the mentor's time is focused, specific, and productive. One participant took the pragmatic view that time allocation was about honoring the value of mentoring through scheduled team sharing, and another took the view that time was about "mentoring over a sustained period". Yet another indicated "mentoring is necessary at all times throughout someone's career", which aligned with the view that mentoring must be "consistent and continuous in both a formal and informal manner". Mentoring can be embedded formally with the structures, processes and resources but also informally with cultural expectations.

6. Conclusion

This study showed that experienced mentors consider visions for enhancing teaching and learning as a way to engage in professional dialogue, which is necessary for education reform. Part of the process for enacting reform is the facilitation of mentoring practices to elicit effective teaching. Participants in this study explained that effective mentors are communicators who willingly share knowledge and resources to enhance teaching and learning. They also indicated that a positive mentor-mentee relationship with mutual respect appears at the centre of the mentoring process and becomes a conduit for discussing pedagogical practices.

Similar to other studies (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008), this study showed that a PLC has the potential to encourage and support teacher development by promoting collaborative problem setting and problem solving activities that target improved student learning outcomes. The PLC was noted as an axiom upon which teachers can not only invest in the current generation of professionals but also invest in the next generation of teachers and in doing so pass to them the ownership and responsibility of the moral purpose (see also Fullan, 2008a, 2008b). It was strongly suggested that PLCs can be used as professional renewal with various professionals bringing new knowledge to the forum. The notion of extending a school PLC to include other employees and preservice teachers was also similar to extending mentoring forums to include teams of people. For example, preservice teachers and mentors within a school site may be able to coordinate activities that promote pedagogical engagement within the group. Another example included a preservice teacher and the mentor joins a PLC operating within the school to learn together. Such arrangements can become more inclusive of preservice teachers as co-educators and extend the networking capabilities for advancing learning about practices. Enlisting preservice teachers into a PLC can be a potential vehicle for recapturing the profession's identity and purpose. In this context, a PLC needs to be purposeful and embedded in how teachers mentor and work with preservice teachers. This dyadic work aims to improve the quality of learning for the preservice teacher and the professional development of teachers, in their roles as mentors. As implementers of education reform, teachers and preservice teachers need to establish opportunities to learn together through which mentoring, as a two-way learning process, can benefit both the mentor and the mentee. It was explained that teachers in their roles as mentors can advance their learning from preservice teachers who can bring to the classroom new ideas from the university.

The pre-conditions to effective professional learning, as outlined above, create opportunities for deprivatising teacher practice in which sharing expertise for the collective good becomes the main purpose and professional learning is taken from the exclusive private domain of teachers. The interaction of teaching professionals through collaborative work, observation, and establishing forums for feedback loops can be underpinned and guided by a philosophy of PLCs and collective mentoring.

Beneficial aspects of mentorship for teachers were noted in this study to emanate from an increase in teachers' professional knowledge and networking with colleagues. Also schools stand to benefit greatly from PLCs and mentorship, particularly if teachers are more productive and satisfied in their day to day work, and demonstrate stronger commitment to organisational culture through enhanced communication, which can be evident both laterally at their working level and vertically to influence above and below the classroom and outside the school (Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ, & Yip, 2008).

The mentor (cooperating classroom practitioner) and the mentee (preservice teacher) relationship are sometimes characterised as a "one-way street" with benefits flowing predominantly from the mentor to the preservice teacher. Less recognised are the benefits that inevitably flow from the preservice teacher to the mentor – hence reciprocity can be embedded in a transformational practice of mentoring. The shared benefits of mentoring include co-construction, authentication, and propagation of knowledge for teaching.

Schools need to have visions for enhancing teaching and learning. These visions generally focus around establishing environments that support teaching and learning, and may extend to establishing partnerships between other education providers (e.g., universities). Hence, collaboration becomes a linchpin in visionary capacity building but requires highly-motivated professionals to create dynamic learning environments. Such environments require supportive leadership, which also focuses on distributing the leadership to empower individuals for advancing education practices. By involving professionals as dynamic and authentic learners within a PLC has the potential to share current knowledge for teaching. Mentoring and PLCs can be strategic levers for mentors, preservice teachers, schools and education systems in an acknowledgement of the potential contribution the teaching profession can make to their own professional learning.

Acknowledgements

This work was conducted within the Teacher Education Done Differently (TEDD) project funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the DEEWR.

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