Professional learning communities:
Leaders, mentors, and like-minded professionals

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Abstract

Professional development is pivotal to the growth of individuals within their work practices, which may be facilitated through professional learning communities (PLCs). Leadership and mentoring also play key roles for activating and facilitating PLCs, however, PLC structures in existing systems may not be realised to the fullest potential. This qualitative case study investigates 25 school executives' articulated understandings of PLCs, which they identified as like-minded participants becoming co-learners in philosophical deliberation for addressing and advancing workplace issues. They highlighted leadership and mentoring as key to effective PLCs. The findings are discussed around the following themes: (1) Understanding the nature of a PLC, (2) Leadership within PLCs, (3) PLCs for improving work practices, (4) A learning community of mentors, (5) PLCs as forums for capacity building a profession, and (6) Identifying what leaders want from PLCs. In professional practice, PLCs were viewed as a community of mentors who focus on improving practices through mutually-beneficial arrangements. PLCs have considerable promise as cost-effective professional development for addressing key issues within varied workplace contexts. Learning about effective mentoring and leadership practices can assist to establish, facilitate, and maintain PLCs.

Keywords: professional learning community, mentor, leader, mentoring

Professions within certain sectors such as education, health and other community services undergo reviews regularly. These reviews can be extensive and generally focus on professionals' work, providers' practices, and lead to recommendations for improvement in practices. For example, in Australia there appears to be an abundance of education reform recommendations (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Educational and Vocational Training [HRSCEVT], 2007); yet other reviews (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; Masters, 2009; Victorian Parliament, Education and Training Committee, 2005) claim that change in teaching practices is not adequate enough. Part of this problem, and solution, are the practitioners who are in positions for implementing reform recommendations.

Despite researchers and educational leaders recommending reform measures, these may not succeed unless professionals see value in implementing such reform. The main reason appears to be inadequate support including the provision of quality professional development programs to implement reform measures as intended with practical resources that aid the implementation. However, reform can be costly and sometimes prohibitive as recommended. Hence, alternative measures are often sought to facilitate reform at fundamental levels in cost

effective ways, such as establishing professional learning communities and mentoring, which require effective leadership.

Easton (2008) argues that educators need to move from "professional development" to professional learning, where they become more knowledgeable and wiser as a result of their learning. There are numerous types of professional learning communities (PLCs) in a wide variety of organisations. Building a learning community requires establishing goals for team learning, building a shared vision, and a system approach (Senge, 1990). Although these goals recognise effective leadership as fundamental to successful processes, PLCs aim to help people learn from each other through their varied skills towards developing "more effective ways of doing things" (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 3); therefore co-mentoring is also a way to learn from each other. Each PLC represents a group of people who drive change for improvement in specific and well-focused areas of need. They are in the first instance like-minded professionals with common goals. In a school context, PLCs focus on improved student learning outcomes by learning about effective teaching practices (Harris & Jones, 2010). For a PLC to flourish requires a supportive environment. Supportive conditions for establishing and maintaining a PLC through collaborative pooling of knowledge and resources present ways for ensuring the learning community prospers in visionary directions (Clarke, 2009). Each PLC has specific discourses to assist in ways of working (Wenger, 1998) and these discourses can be toolkits categorise particular identities.

Generally, professionals within PLCs are committed to become solution seekers with clear purposes to drive change. These professionals operate at high-functioning levels with a capacity for inquiry, learning and innovation, which may also lead "to achieving long-term cultural change in an organization" (Stoll, 2010, p. 157). There is a sense of connectedness for individuals within an effective PLC and a strong sense of operating within a safe environment where individuals can voice their opinions. This connectedness operates within an interdependency that helps to facilitate professional growth (Cooper, 2009). A safe PLC environment comes with a "climate of trust and respect from colleagues" allowing individuals to "feel safe to take the risks associated with collaboration, open dialog and deprivatization of practice" (Stoll, 2010, p. 155). Therefore, the successfulness of a PLC can be dependent on an agreement between key stakeholders of these ideologies. Such agreements may not necessarily be articulated but presented through explicit actions and modelling of its ideologies.

There are many forms of PLCs, however, it is what happens within a PLC that can heighten the experiences for all involved. A key reason for individuals continuing in a PLC is the type of environment created by leadership, which is distributed to others within the group. Both mentoring and leadership are considered ways to reform practices at foundational levels (e.g., Briscoe & Peters, 1997). Mentoring can lead towards improving professional practices (Hudson & McRobbie, 2004); consequently having effective mentors and effective leaders within PLCs can assist to guide the learning experiences. For years, educators (Galbraith & Cohen, 1995) have advocated mentoring as professional development, as mentoring provides opportunities for experienced mentors to improve on their own professional practices. In addition, mentoring can lead mentors to recognise their considerable expertise in the field to assist others in developing practices. Both leadership and mentoring can be purposeful within a PLC. Experienced mentors and leaders can facilitate "the evolution of a learning community in teacher professional development programs" (Kim, Miller, Herbert, Loving, & Pedersen, 2009). It is claimed that insufficient leadership or support for a PLC results in an unsustainable model and can limit professional growth (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many,

2006). Similarly, poor mentoring can also limit professional development and, as not all professionals are suited to these roles, there can be a lack of suitably qualified mentors (Long, 1997). In teaching, for example, there is inadequate education to prepare mentors on how to develop effective teachers, consequently, "mentors need guidance and training as they develop the skills necessary to become effective mentors" (Upson, Koballa, & Gerber, 2002, p. 4). Hence, it comes as no surprise that "more high-level training needs to occur for the mentor" to develop expertise (Riggs & Sandlin, 2002), and likewise for leadership roles. Effective mentors and leaders have particular knowledge and skills to critique constructively both their own practices and other's practices. It is argued in this paper that mentoring and leadership are critical to the experiences in PLCs. What do school executives understand about PLCs, mentoring and leadership, and how can these be interrelated?

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 25 school executives (mainly site coordinators who manage mentoring programs in their Queensland schools) who were involved in a three-day professional development program facilitated by the researcher and another university colleague. 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 report on their own practices show considerable variation in quality and quantity (Hudson, 2010).

The three-day program was organised and promoted as a professional learning community (PLC) where each member's opinions, experiences, knowledge and skills about mentoring and leadership 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 thinking and discussions. 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 was intended to develop common understandings

There were 23 females and 2 males with 18 of them aged between 30-49 years and 5 older than 50 years of age. Only 2 were between 22-29 years of age. All had mentored more than one preservice teacher previously with 12 who claimed they had mentored more than 5 mentees. Their roles within the school varied with 15 who were either principals or deputy principals, 3 were heads of departments, and 7 had other specialised roles in the school. Five participants had been employed in teaching between 6-10 years and 19 participants had worked in the education system for more than 10 years. There was only one participant who had worked in the education system for less than 6 years. It was also noted that 60% of these participants had worked in their current schools between 1-5 years, two for 6-10 years, and 8 had worked in the current school for10 years.

Methodology

This case study investigates 25 school executives' understandings of professional learning communities (PLCs) in relationship to leadership and mentoring. This study aims to explore professionals' understandings of PLCs, mentoring and leadership. 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, the executives engaged with various intellectual materials that were used to facilitate discussions. For example, participants 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 sheets of paper to record responses. All material was transcribed and collated within the discussion topics previously stated in the context of this study.

Finally, three questionnaires requiring extended written responses were administered one on each day of the program. Some key questions on the three surveys included: What do you think is a professional learning community (PLC)? How might a PLC have a role or influence in the improvement process for teaching and learning at your school? How may mentoring be part of a PLC? How can preservice teachers (undergraduates) be part of a PLC? Does mentoring support the development of the teaching profession? How? What leadership skills are required for initiating and maintaining a PLC? 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).

Findings and discussion

Findings will be discussed under the following headings: (1) Understanding the nature of a PLC, (2) Leadership within PLCs, (3) PLCs for improving work practices, (4) A learning community of mentors, (5) Inclusiveness of PLCs: mentoring and undergraduates, (6) PLCs as forums for capacity building a profession, and (7) What do leaders want from PLCs?

Understanding the nature of a PLC

These executives were asked to state their idea of defining a PLC for which responses were collated into one main general theme about being co-learners within a professional group, which was articulated clearly by Participant 1: "Any group of like-minded, or like-educated people who interact with a common purpose or goal". Harris and Jones (2010) and Stoll (2010) outline that the need for an agreed understanding of how the particular PLC would operate requires commonly-shared goals. It was indicated that this like-mindedness could be specific or general in nature but required a purposeful direction. Participant 9 stated that PLCs are, "a group of people who have an interest and willingness to share knowledge, expertise, experience and practical tips on similar topics" and Participant 16 noted PLCs as "professionals with shared vision, but also the bringing together of their collective skills", which is also highlighted by other educators (e.g., Huffman, 2003) as underlying principles of PLCs. It has been long recognised (Clarke, 2009; Senge, 1990) that pooling collective

knowledge and skills creates a climate for high functionality within a PLC. Importantly, collective knowledge can translate into improved professional work practices (Stoll, 2010).

There was a sense that a PLC was for the common good that sought higher purposes for exploring, refining, and embedding practices to advance the organisation's goals. There was also the notion of a PLC as a safe environment where people can actively voice opinions and ideas that may lead towards enacting more effective practices within their positions. Participant 2 stated a PLC was "a melting pot of constructive ideas and discussions which are involving people in a variety of roles within education" while Participant 16 claimed it as a "professional sharing (particularly in regards to progressive/innovative and non-traditional methods) with the goal of educational progress" (parenthesis included). This communal sharing towards progress is not unlike the early Greek forums where Plato and Aristotle would deliberate with colleagues over philosophical endeavours to address societal issues and problems, and indeed for the "common good". In this study, the participants were school executives within a profession that focuses on looking after children. There are personalised interactions where teachers work together for a common purpose in a socially-constructed learning environment. Participant 23 noted those within a PLC as stakeholders who are "committed to maximizing learning potential from each other". Without commitment and purpose a PLC would rapidly dissipate, hence, everyone within the PLC needs to understand the advantages of being involved within such forums.

In determining the nature of a PLC, one participant highlighted an "information-discussion-feedback cycle" to framework the discourse within a PLC. Participant 24 stated this framework as "a community where discussion and feedback from all levels... can come together to address needs and develop ways to bring about effective change" (Participant 24). Information in the form of professional knowledge is brought to a PLC to aid its agenda. Such information generally presents for discussion and deliberation on actions to advance the PLC's goals. Furthermore, all stakeholders need to gain benefit from the PLC experience "where everyone learns each other's knowledge, skills and experiences" (Participant 25).

Executives were asked to give an example of a PLC in their own work environments for which all provided at least one example. Many focused on their meetings within the system structure, such as year level meetings, parents and citizen meetings, reference group meetings, and executive meetings. This highlighted the essential nature of the relationships at varying levels to advance the system's goals. Indeed, participants showed that any one school had multiple opportunities for discourse around specific PLC areas. To illustrate, Participant 5 stated, "We have teams that meet about different issues, for example, Curriculum Reference Group and Juncture Meetings at year levels where we value expertise in our school and share it", and Participant 12 wrote that her work place has "committees related to KLA's behaviour support, ICT's, and beginning teachers". The titles of these PLCs also presented identities and emphasised their primary purposes.

Different PLCs included, but were not limited to, highly specialised discourse, for instance there was a "Gifted and Talented Committee – aiming towards achieving optimum learning enrichment opportunities for highly-abled children" (Participant 16). Yet, there were other frameworks used for discussion (i.e., mentoring and its various forms such as co-mentoring). Importantly, many claimed mentoring as a unique opportunity to enter discussions about their teaching practices, which was noted as the core business. Participant 25 wrote, "Through the mentor program developed we have the opportunity to observe each other's practice in a non-threatening way and provide critical feedback to enhance our skills". Participant 4 commented

on the co-mentoring that can occur when teachers collaborate on key issues, "Our teachers work closely together in sector groups which include a 'Learning Co-teacher'. They discuss, problem solve, plan and evaluate everything they do as a team". Teamwork and coming together of like-minded professionals created PLC identities where teachers acted as supporters, confidantes, and co-mentors. PLCs are established with specific purposes and multiple PLCs can exist within a particular workplace (Senge, 1990; Dufour, 2004). Each PLC presents a unique "collective sense of identity and purpose" (Nielsen & Triggs, 2007, p. 178). Even though collaboration, collectiveness, and PLC committees gave the impression of equal contribution with joint responsibility, leadership was identified as a way to unify people towards achieving common goals.

There appears to be iterative processes for advancing PLC's goals. For instance, information-discussion-feedback can present as a framework for operating within a PLC, additionally, feedback suggestions are then actioned (see Figure 1). Action inquiry allows practices to be trialled with reflections-on-practice brought to the PLC as an assessment of the new innovation (e.g., see Harris & Jones, 2010; Kaplan, 2008). A way to learn is trialling an innovative practice to "validate their own curriculum choices and how these choices impact their own teaching and student learning" (Kaplan, 2008, p. 341).
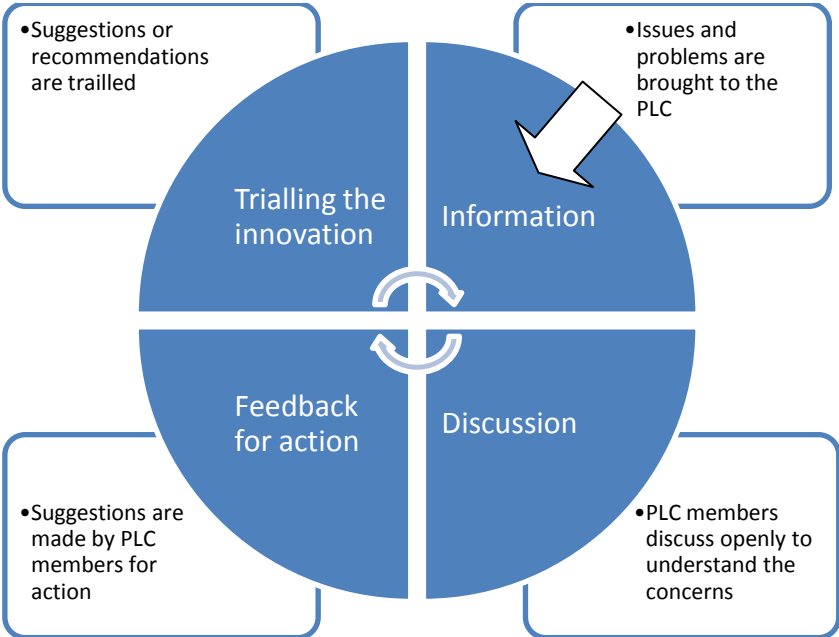

Figure 1. PLC cycle

Leadership within PLCs

Inspirational leadership within PLCs was highlighted by these executives, which included efficient organisation skills with priorities, personal attributes such as enthusiasm, positive attitudes, and a genuine care for others. These ideas were summarised by Participant 4's collection of phrases: "Passion for education, great interpersonal skills, effective listener, creative problem solver, does everything for the benefit of the children" and Participant 2 also said, "Providing support and positive feedback to staff in addition to constructive criticism where appropriate. Allowing staff to feel listened to and appreciated". A PLC can provide information, discuss and give feedback with affirmative decisions for trialling an innovation.

These decisions result from persuasive arguments and, at some stages, an effective leader will need "to have hard conversations and make hard decisions" (Participant 9). Such decisions also need to reflect a fairness where the consultative approach has taken place and there is "consistency of judgment and decisions and follow through" (Participant 10). Participant comments emphasised that PLCs must have leadership, a person or people who can facilitate the group's direction, to make the hard decisions, yet provide support where required.

Leadership roles appear pivotal for establishing, facilitating, and advancing PLCs with purposeful endeavours (Clarke, 2009; Stevens, 2007). Leaders in such roles lead by example and provide inspiration to others within the learning group to achieve. For example, Participant 11 states, "Currently at my school my principal inspires me to constantly strive to enhance my teaching practices. She is inspirational, as her leadership and diverse practices lead me to believe more in my own abilities as a teacher". It seemed that personal leadership qualities were essential for maintaining PLCs in a positive and open manner, particularly "Being fair and respectful to all staff, supportive to staff, able to listen and be unbiased, has both a working relationship and a social relationship with staff, available to provide support and leadership" (Participant 12). Indeed, effective leaders who initiate PLCs consider all staff within the workplace environment and target individuals and groups of like-minded people for learning within their fields and positions. In the school context, Participant 13 stated within one focus group that an effective leader has:

> The ability to build capacity in the whole school, teacher aides, teachers and admin staff. Their understanding of communication skills – importance of valuing and listening, non-judgemental of the small issues, guide with the big issues. Be real – understand we all need mentoring and coaching to be the best we can be.

Apart from personal attributes of enthusiasm and "passion for the profession", leaders of PLCs must also present a "practice of mutual respect" (Participant 23) and demonstrate "excellent knowledge and understanding (and) problem solving" (Participant 14). Interpersonal leadership traits can aid in building and sustaining a PLC (Harris & Jones, 2010). Participant 15 states that effective leaders aim "to work as part of a team - knowledge is power - leadership is actions not position". Leadership behaviour can be modelled and as such these initiators and facilitators of PLCs bring to the table "a vision and willingness/openness to ensure a shared or collaborative process" (Participant 16). Yet they need to demonstrate in practical terms they are "equitable – give the team ownership and instil a culture of collective responsibility" (Participant 18). Again, empowering others and distributing leadership can assist to sustain a PLC, with a leader who can "step out of the way, and lead from the back (Stevens, 2007, p.108). Such leadership may call upon transformational practices (Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2003) or distributed leadership practices (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001) that help the continuation of a PLC. This idea of distributing leadership was a theme with many responses, especially notions of leaders using their personal attributes to engage others within workplace opportunities, which was stated by the following two participants in one of the focus groups:

> Willingness to listen; their totally human qualities not just the 'corporate line'. A strong belief in the potential of others around them and the willingness to give opportunities to other staff members – not just the big noters and noise makers of the group. Their belief in me. (Participant 24)
>
> Clear articulation of personal vision and values; ability to persuade and motivate others so the vision becomes shared (collaborative ownership) - consistency and the ability to make tough

decisions. Giving authentic feedback and providing opportunities for others to develop their own capabilities; delegating responsibility for outcomes and encouraging ownership. (Participant 20)

Even though PLCs were noted as a positive problem-solving endeavour (see Stevens, 2007), such communities of discourse need to be aware of each member's level of contribution and that others are encouraged to have equal opportunities in the discussion, for example, Participant 18 claimed, "I enjoy being part of a PLC and discussing key issues and philosophies, although I feel I can be reticent / unconfident in leading others to achieve goals I believe are important to attain". Effective leadership would monitor participants' level of engagement and employ measures to facilitate greater equity of contribution. Participants commented on "empowering others in their roles" to take responsibility for enacting innovations and facilitating collaboration (see also Stevens, 2007). This empowerment can be noted as distributing leadership. "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, pp.173-174).

In this study, collaborative ownership, building capacity and recognising the potential in others presented as leadership opportunities for empowerment of the collective. In the context of teaching, teachers need opportunities to challenge themselves to reach their potential as prospective leaders for which PLCs can provide such a framework (Neilsen & Triggs, 2007). Even though these leaders may need to be "two steps ahead" (Participant 19), problems can arise within PLCs and so PLC leaders must have "great conflict resolution skills" (Participant 17) if a particular PLC is to continue along a positive and productive path.

PLCs for improving work practices

There was very strong evidence that PLCs can lead towards improving work practices for existing professionals. Professionals in this study recognised the PLC as a form of professional development (PD) to advance workplace effectiveness (see also Wenger, 1998), which was emphasised by Participant 5 who stated, "Encourage teachers to see the need for PD and working as a team to get the job done – sharing of more expertise amongst each other and reduce teacher isolation". Teaching professionals can operate within isolated environments where timetable schedules do not overtly facilitate flexibility for sharing experiences; opportunities for PLCs must be planned and embrace others to co-learn so they do not operate in isolation. PLCs act as PD for very specific purposes and aim to build capacity within an organisation (Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001). It was stated that PLCs as professional development helps to "coordinate and provide optimum learning opportunities" (Participant 16). Reform measures are introduced frequently into workplaces for improvement of practices, particularly in the government sectors such as education, health, community services and so forth. For education, this means staying current with "the most up-to-date curriculum... an opportunity to share ideas and moderate work... ensures consistency" (Participant 7). A systematic approach to reform necessitates a collectivisation of ideas that PLCs can deliberate, unpack and action on a system's requirements.

An ultimate aim of being in a PLC is improving practices for ensuring successful outcomes aligned with the organisation's core business (Kaplan, 2008; Wenger, 1998). PLCs can assist to "enhance diverse practice and ensure consistency across the school. Improve engagement of students" (Participant 11) and "engage people to make a difference to our children – by

seeing that we as teachers are just one component of that and there is the need to work together" (Participant 17). Focused and purposeful PLCs address the fundamental goals of the organisation and identify reasons for achieving successful outcomes (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2007). Participant 22 claimed that a PLC needs to have "focused professional dialogue to explore best practice to improve student achievement". Hence, PLCs were seen as spaces where staff can "align their practice for the common good" (Participant 25).

Participants explained that improving practices within PLCs relies heavily on the sharing of knowledge and skills of group members. Mentoring can occur within a PLC where one educator has skills in a particular area to mentor colleagues. Indeed, it was noted that mentoring can include undergraduates but should extend to colleagues such as "beginning and returning teachers mentored by experienced mentors" (Participant 23). Therefore, whether at the undergraduate level, beginning practitioner level or veteran returning to the workplace, mentors in PLCs can support through "discussions of concerns regarding certain areas of need" (Participant 24). However, there are time constraints in forming PLCs around mentoring as despite "providing an opportunity for teachers to sit, think, share and discuss, schools are incredibly busy places so it's important to find the time to do this" (Participant 19).

A learning community of mentors

Mentoring can occur in workplaces forums, which emerges in both formal and informal professional learning communities (PLCs). Yet mentors may require further education to advance their mentoring practices in line with current understandings. There were only 11 out of 25 executives who claimed they had received professional development in mentoring, which varied in quality and quantity. For instance, Participants 4, 16, and 25 had one day of mentoring professional development, Participants 13, 21 and 23 were involved in their department of education organised programs (e.g., Flying Start Mentoring Program, and Different People Working Together Program), and other PD occurred within work conducted through their positions (e.g., lead learning manager). Nevertheless, they all had experience in mentoring as noted in the context but because of their positions have been involved in other PLCs.

Mentoring can be used as a vehicle for enhancing practices but this requires a theoretical framework to ensure consistency and currency of practice (Hudson, 2010). Mentoring can be used to assist beginning practitioners "to gain some 'foundation skills', if you like, to help them to begin their careers in a confident and competent manner" (Participant 2). Yet, mentoring can extend past the notion of undergraduates to professionals interacting with each other as indicated by Participant 1. For any collaboration, "mentoring will bring exposure and new ideas about what a PLC is or create an idea of what they would like their PLC to look like" (Participant 3). Many of these school executives commented on the collaborative efforts of a community of mentors where they develop their own discourse and ways of collegial support (e.g., Participant 8) towards building capacity within their work environments (Participant 9). It was also articulated strongly that a community of mentors is a mutually-beneficial relationship, where they can present "reciprocal teaching as a strategy" (Participant 23) or simply "teachers mentoring teachers" (Participant 21). Enabling practices through constructive mentoring can "stimulate collaboration, guided conversation, peer-to-peer support, explore areas of strength and lesser strengths, encourage reflective practice" (Participant 22).

Reflection on practice (Schön, 1987) appeared as key for professional growth and as the thinking behind establishing a community of mentors, particularly as a "forum for support and discussion, forum for sharing ideas, and a forum for reflection" (Participant 18). Participant 19 said that such a PLC would, "facilitate the group, give ideas to be discussed, help others with ideas, and assist in reflecting on their practices". A community of mentors presents as a structure to have "open discussion to assist in developing skills and passing on knowledge and experience" (Participant 25) but can also be used for "enabling directions to be set and a supportive person for debriefing as a 'sounding board'" (Participant 24).

Inclusiveness of PLCs: mentoring and undergraduates

Members of PLCs need to be inclusive of people wanting to learn within the goals of that particular PLC. Undergraduates are in their developing stages for their professions. They need and seek the experience of practicing professionals who can guide them with the practicalities and logistics involved in becoming professionals themselves one day. Undergraduates can "help develop teachers – keep them up-to-date, offer new experiences – share their thoughts/knowledge" (Participant 5). They also need to be part of PLCs within different forums to understand how forums operate in unique ways and for unique purposes, hence, they can "attend staff / year level meetings; be invited to specialist meetings (according to their interests / need for development e.g. learning support meetings / sports carnivals etc" (Participant 18).

Participant 7 claimed that the undergraduates are "always welcome to be part of a committee when on prac. They need to be more vocal at these meeting and share their knowledge". Being more vocal during meetings may be difficult if their experiences are limited in the specialised field, nonetheless, undergraduates need to learn to become vocal by "informing teachers what they would like to include" (Participant 11) and "providing feedback; letting us know what they need to feel equipped" (Participant 17). It was stated that undergraduates must receive quality support to "find their feet" for which mentors can aid by "bringing them into the fold as professionals" (Participant 16). Participant 4 commented that "It would be wonderful to see the pre-service teachers and their mentors all joining together at times to discuss points of interest" (Participant 4), and sharing practices using "reciprocal teaching as a strategy" (Participant 23). In this forum, PLCs were fundamentally about reciprocity, and these participants illustrated that reciprocity can occur between one who is more experienced (mentor) and one who is less experienced (mentee) in the field (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008), and that both can learn from each other. However, a PLC needs to comprise of more than two people to form a community otherwise it would be deemed as a pairing or partnership.

PLCs as forums for capacity building a profession

All agreed that mentoring within PLCs can support the development of the profession and leads to further capacity building. Participant 4 wrote: "It is a crucial factor in their development. I need to challenge my teachers to be effective mentors and build the capacity of our future teaching workforce – not just have them for 4 weeks and say well done". Mentoring within a PLC was considered as an "enabler to learning and development" (Participant 13) and as a way "to develop a rich environment and value each participant's knowledge and understanding and growth for future learning" (Participant 10). Professionals who reflect on practice can refine their skills (e.g., see Schön, 1987), in which mentoring can assist in the reflection processes as it "strengthens everyone's teaching ability" (Participant

14). Figure 1 previously showed that discussion and feedback were essential to the operations of a PLC, yet mentoring from those with experience during the trialling period may be necessary to heighten the possibilities of success. Such capacity building must be explicit towards finding practical solutions to issues with "focused support in specific areas e.g. behaviour management through partnership and effective feedback" (Participant 22). It was indicated by most of the participants that capacity building requires "positive partnerships" (Participant 23). In education, teachers need to work outside of their isolation for which a PLC can present collaboration to discuss teaching practices, observing others, and modifying methods accordingly (Clarke, 2009). Individual trialling of proposed actions suggested by PLC members can lead to solutions; however partnering can also provide the mentoring support required for implementation.

What do leaders want from PLCs?

These school leaders presented altruistic reasons for involvement in PLCs. Most indicated they have a "passion for mentoring", and knowledge and experiences that they wish "to pass on", particularly as they "enjoy working with others and have a desire for them to succeed" (Participant 6). Another noted her executive position as "a privilege to make a difference to a child's world" by mentoring others (Participant 17). This was extended to the mentoring of preservice teachers where PLCs can provide a "common understanding and process for the development of assistance for student teachers across the community... to build learning environments for their growth and development" (Participant 10). There were hints and strong statements of themselves being in unfavourable mentee positions themselves in the past and hence wanting to rectify these injustices. For example, "going through university I had one mentor who I felt didn't support my growth as a teacher and I didn't want that to happen to someone else" (Participant 11) and Participant 5 stated,

> I had a terrible experience as a preservice teacher when I was 18 and as a result did not enter the teaching profession until 10 years later! I have had a good experience when mentoring and believe I am supportive and owe it to others.

This is another reason for having a community of mentors who can support each other and their mentees. Such a PLC would also alleviate potential problems where one mentor may not be suited to a mentee or vice versa.

The philanthropic motivations continued along the lines of capacity building of the workplace, which appeared as a priority to these executives, as they "believe in the importance of building capacity" (Participant 9) and "want the best for my profession!" (Participant 18, exclamation mark included). Participant 22 continued to be focused on the organisation's core business of teaching and learning: "Build capability of teachers to learn from each other in context to develop pedagogy to improve student achievement". They wanted to make a difference to the workplace and implement fundamental principles associated with achieving favourable student learning outcomes. These school executives wanted to develop more confidence and self-empowerment, professional skills and knowledge, leadership skills, understandings about learning, and improvement in mentoring practices. As these participants were already in executive positions, many of their comments focused on leadership and developing their own confidence to lead. For example, "Confidence to get all (professionals) on board to be a more active mentor – giving more of yourself" (Participant 3), and "Confidence and leadership skills and ability to pay it forward for children's benefit in general" (Participant 1).

There was little doubt that effective leadership can bring about change (e.g., see Boseman, 2008; Fullan, 2008). In addition, leadership was closely aligned with effective mentoring practices in this study. Nearly all wanted "a wider understanding on how to be a better mentor" (Participant 11) to "improve my mentoring ability" towards "offering the best service to my clients" (Participant 14). They required specific "guidelines to base my mentoring practices on" (Participant 12), and "understandings of optimum ways in which I can support the process at our site" (Participant 23). Three of these executives wanted to learn specifically about how to "ensure quality relationships and practices for ourselves" (Participant 2), particularly in how to "become a more supportive mentor and share my skills and knowledge" (Participant 7). Indeed, Participant 21 said she wanted, "a specific mentoring program/module to present to teachers - encourage, promote, persuade, mentoring at our school (and) capture a key group of quality teachers to work as mentors". Hence, a PLC needs to include a wide range of partners to facilitate programs that develop skills in mentoring and leadership. Finally, and extending beyond the immediate key stakeholder arrangement, Participant 16 noted the university connection as part of a wider PLC that can offer "a more productive connection between the university and the coal-face". This productive connection would provide a forum for learning about mentoring and leadership to include all key stakeholders in PLCs in order to enhance the implementation of the profession's fundamental principles.

Conclusion

This study investigated executives' understanding of professional learning communities and how these can be used to advance workplace practices. This study understood the nature of PLCs as a collaboration within a professional group where participants become co-learners in philosophical deliberation for addressing and advancing workplace issues. It was shown that PLCs are established with commitment to contextual needs and circumstances that generally aim to achieve practical applications for the common good. The continuation of a PLC requires effective leadership and an information-discussion -feedback cycle that utilises specific discourses for problem solving within the workplace. Indeed, more research is required to understand commonalities of effective practice when operating a PLC.

It was found that a strong relationship existed between successful PLCs and leadership. In this study, the leader's role was considered pivotal within a PLC as both an inspiration and for ensuring like-minded people are co-learners within respectful and equitable arrangements. Effective leaders within PLCs were noted to have enthusiasm, problem-solving abilities, vision and, importantly, a way to instil collective ownership and contribution to the process for deliberation. Effective leaders provide a forum conducive to open discussion and as a productive pathway for building capacity within the workplace environment. Apart from having personal attributes to facilitate professionals' interactions within PLCs, effective leaders can guide towards decision-making process, particularly at times when hard decisions are required for achieving successful outcomes aligned with the core business of the organisation. The implications for organisations include the development of programs advocating favourable leadership attributes and practices for facilitating a PLC. Conducting a needs analysis of an organisation can identify potential PLCs; however there will need to be scaffolding on how PLCs can be managed effectively.

Leadership and mentoring were closely linked in this study. Mentoring was heralded as a unique opportunity for focused professional dialogue for not only undergraduates but also within co-mentoring contexts where professionals can learn from each other. The implications

for workplace practices include presenting professionals with understandings about how to guide a PLC through effective leadership and mentoring practices. Another option is establishing a community of mentors who focus on improving practices through mutually-beneficial arrangements. Mentors within such a PLC can deliberate and implement core business practices assigned to the organisation but also reflect on the outcomes of such practices and use each other as sounding boards for further improvements. Suggestions from PLCs may require pairing or grouping of like-minded professionals for trialling possible solutions. Co-mentoring arrangements can take the implementation phase to a higher level and would also allow two or more perspectives to be brought back to the PLC when reporting on the outcomes. In many cases, it will require leaders to initiate roles but others within the organisation can also "step up to the plate" to establish or facilitate PLCs for distinct purposes. The benefits of conducting purposeful PLCs can extend from upper and middle management to those at the coalface and recipients of their practices. Regardless of the workplace contexts in professional occupations, PLCs have considerable promise as cost-effective professional development for addressing key issues and building capacity of staff. Leaders want to advance their organisations and focus on the core business, which is embedded within the organisational goals. It appears that learning about effective leadership and mentoring practices need to be an integral part for establishing and maintaining PLCs.

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