The Professional Learning Community

A fulcrum of change

John Hellner
Teacher Educator, University of Waikato at Tauranga

ABSTRACT
Paralleling the accelerating pace of educational change in the last two decades has been the development of a professional learning community (PLC) in schools. Characterised by teacher collaboration and a spirit of enquiry, the PLC represents a response to change and an opportunity to benefit teachers, students and schools, using an approach most suited to adults. The paper undertakes a literature review of various aspects of the PLC: attributes; evolution; benefits; and measurement of the PLC.

Research
Keywords
Collaborative learning, effective practices, professional development, professional learning communities, teachers.

INTRODUCTION
Individual teacher learning and professional growth no longer keeps pace with change. If we want to improve and remain effective, we need to take charge of external change, rather than being controlled by it. Doing so necessitates working together in a learning organisation which is 'continually expanding its capacity to create its future' (Senge, as cited in Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003, p. 132). We need to work in organisations, collectively developing an understanding of where they are going and what is important.

In the education sector, the PLC provides a pathway to a learning organisation: one which comprises 'a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-orientated, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning' (Mitchell & Sackney, as cited in Stoll, et al., 2003, p. 132).

A PLC can enable educational institutions to capitalise on change, on research, on technology and on self management, in order to secure the benefits for the school, for the teachers, and most importantly, for the students. If we fail to build learning communities, offering a web of support to all the members, we run the risk of building castles on shifting sands as existing learning institutions become increasingly stultified by waves of change.

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES OF A PLC: A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION
The literature serves to flesh out fundamental dimensions or attributes of a PLC. Hord (1997, 1998) suggests five critical attributes of a PLC, confirmed again in her work with a team of researchers in 2004 (as cited in Bullough, 2007).

Shared and Supportive Leadership
Firstly, a shared and supportive leadership, in turn nurturing leadership among staff with a distribution of power, authority and decision making. Haberman (2004) uses the term "egalitarianism" and notes a dispensing with formalities as characteristic of such a community. Stoll, et al. (2003) view 'concern for individual and minority views …' (p. 168) as a defining aspect of a PLC.

Shared Values and Vision
Another attribute, shared values and vision (Hord, 1997, 1998), evolves from the values of the staff and leads to building staff supported behaviours. The Ministry of Education (2006) endorses the creation of shared vision arguing that it is 'essential this vision-building is carried out collaboratively and not simply imposed by educational leaders' (p. 66). Haberman (2004) and Carver (2004) similarly embrace the notion of a shared and collaboratively developed vision, emphasising that the vision must be embedded in improving teaching practice and an undeviating focus on student learning. The vision should make teaching and learning a lasting and powerful experience, not just a cliché about "learning for all" found in mission statements.

Collective Learning and Collaboration
A third attribute, the practice of collective learning and collaboration, might be central to the functioning of a PLC judging by the repetition of the theme in various guises throughout the literature (Bambino, 2002; Carver, 2004; DuFour, 2004; Haberman, 2004; Hord, 1997, 1998, as cited in Bullough, 2007). In a collective and collaborative learning community, teachers seek new knowledge, skills and strategies, share information and work together to solve problems and improve learning opportunities inherent in real site-based challenges.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) present the term "interactive professionalism" (p. 63). This term 'serves to capture much of what is essential in the relationship and communication necessary to foster reflective inquiry and the co-construction of understanding about professional practice' (Ministry of

Education, 2006, p. 59). Collaboration and collegiality form the twin pillars supporting interactive professionalism. DuFour (2004) uses an equally indicative phrase, 'culture of collaboration' (p. 8). Carver (2004) believes teachers are 'empowered as professionals' (p. 60) by the practice of sharing.

Teachers Sharing Personal Practice

The next attribute, intimately linked to the last, teachers sharing personal practice, proves equally as prevalent in the literature (Bambino, 2002; Carver, 2004; DuFour, 2004; Haberman, 2004; Hord, 1997, 1998). Teachers observing classroom practice, giving feedback and mentoring each other, leads to individual and community improvement. Jianping and Poppink (2007) call for "open lessons" as 'job embedded professional development' (p. 189). Louis and Kruse (as cited in Hord, 1998) describe it as 'deprivatization of practice' (p. 6), and caution that this practice is 'not evaluative, but is part of the "peers helping peers" process' (p. 16). DuFour (2004) delineates this attribute of PLCs referring to 'collaborative conversations … to make public what has been traditionally private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, results' (p. 9). In short, open doors, candid conversations and opportunities for reflection and discussion should be the norm in a PLC (Induction into Learning Communities, 2005).

Supportive Conditions

Intrinsic to the first four attributes of a PLC is a fifth dimension: supportive conditions (Hord 1997, 1998). Supportive conditions include school structures and resources, open communication channels, and trusting and respectful relationships. It seems exceedingly difficult to imagine a collaborative, supportive and sharing community without such a fundamental state of affairs.

EVOLUTION OF PLC: A PARADIGM SHIFT

The last two decades in education have witnessed paradigm shifts in our views of professional development in response to an accelerating rate of change and the exponential growth of a research culture. The 19th century model of "sink or swim" for teachers has slowly declined, giving way to a spotlight on random and individual professional development designed to enhance a personal teaching style. In the 1980s the shift began to retreat from a concentration on individual workers to the workplace setting as a learning environment. The new focus simultaneously converged with the notion of continuous learning as a prerequisite to a competitive and productive workplace. As an upshot, both educational and corporate leaders began seeking to foster and sustain learning communities to reform organisations and to improve outcomes (Sergiovanni, 1996).

In 1989, Rosenholtz's research on the teaching workforce proposed sharing ideas, collaboration, learning from each other and improved practice as the gateway to student benefits (as cited in Hord, Meehan, Orletsky & Sattes, 1999). In 1990, organisational "guru" Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline* (as cited in Hord, et al., 1999) promoted the idea of a work environment in which employees engaged as teams, developed a shared vision and operated collaboratively to improve corporate outcomes. These paradigm shifts caught the attention of educators. Seminal thinker Sergiovanni (1996) argued that when a school functions as a community, its members embrace shared ideals, norms, purposes and values, which contributed to continuous school improvement. The label for this phenomena became "professional learning communities".

THE PLC AND ADULT LEARNERS: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

As the shape of the PLC emerged, it became clear that learning in a community better suited the nature of adult learners than the outdated model of individual professional development in isolation.

Writing about collaborative enquiry, an intertwined strand in the PLC fabric, Jackson and Street (2005) argue for its potential as a development tool, especially appropriate to the needs of professional adults, because it offers a constructivist approach in a social learning environment. The collegial, self-directed and autonomous nature of the tasks proves motivating and engaging to adults. The same arguments apply to the critical attributes of the wider PLC.

A PLC demonstrates constructivist learning theory. Learners (the professional staff) begin with a current situation, need or concern stemming from real and relevant site-based issues or problems. A PLC requires learners to work actively with new knowledge: drawing on prior knowledge and experiences; discussing, sharing, reflecting with other learners; modifying and adjusting beliefs and practices; and applying them to the specific school setting.

Jackson and Street (2005) echo Vygotskian learning theory when they note 'an important development has been a much more explicit recognition that learning is a social activity. Most people learn more effectively with others than in isolation' (p. 59). They suggest advantages for adults of learning in a social situation: 'Working with others offers the potential for "checking out", explaining, teaching others, testing out the concepts and talking through our own understandings, misconceptions and uncertainties' (p. 59).

Jackson and Street's (2005) arguments dovetail nicely with the characteristics and principles of adult learners in general: controlling their learning; linking new learning to prior knowledge; wanting relevant and pragmatic applications of learning; and benefiting from collaboration. In addition, being actively involved in the learning, exercising autonomy, and being self-directed (Billington, 1996; Lieb, 1991).

BENEFITS: CAUGHT NOT TAUGHT

Much as the value of effective professional development in fostering teacher growth seems uncontested, the research and the literature make a strong case for the benefits of the PLC flowing from teachers, to students and to the school.

Teachers

Hord's (1997) summary of the research literature offers a broad cornucopia of positive results for teachers. The tangible include reduced isolation, job satisfaction, higher morale, less absenteeism, and making teaching adaptations for students. The less tangible include commitment to school

mission and to systemic changes, shared responsibility for student success, new and powerful knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners, increased meaning and understanding of curriculum and the teacher's role, professional renewal, and inspiration.

Teachers who feel supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice are more committed and effective than those who do not feel supported (Hord, 1997). Furthermore, says Van Horn (2006), PLC teacher members are 'more apt to venture into the unknown, to engage in long term inquiry, and/or to share what they are learning …' (p. 61). Van Horn cites policy studies on PLCs and concludes they can provide educators with 'purpose, collaboration, commitment and community' (Langer, as cited in Van Horn, p. 60). As a consequence of working in a satisfying and rewarding professional environment, teachers feel 'empowered as professionals and responsible for their own learning' (Carver, 2004, p. 60) and are 'more positive about staying in the profession' (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 9), contributing to the resolution of recruitment and retention issues.

Jackson and Street (2005) cite a systematic review on the positive impact of collaborative enquiry to report changes to teachers' behaviour which included greater confidence, enthusiasm for collaboration, greater commitment to trying something new and to change in general, and enhanced self-efficacy or 'belief in their power as teachers to make a difference in pupil learning' (p. 61). The only qualifying remark on the effectiveness of collaborative environment for teachers seems to come from Jackson and Street: 'It is important to note that the positive outcomes sometimes only emerged after periods of relative discomfort – things often got worse before they got better' (p. 61).

Students

Haberman (2004) suggests the teachers' attitudinal shift, reflected in a renewed love of professional learning afforded in a PLC, is caught by students, not taught. 'Only teachers who are avid, internally motivated learners can truly teach their students the joy of learning' (Haberman, 2004, p. 52). Ultimately, greater teacher effectiveness in schools with PLCs impacts on student results: 'decreased dropout rates'; 'lower rates of absenteeism'; 'increased learning … more equitably distributed in smaller high schools'; and 'smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds' (Hord, 1997, p. 28). Jackson and Street (2005) note 'some unanticipated outcomes [for students] in terms of change in attitudes and beliefs, enhanced motivation and increasingly active participation' (p. 61), which may serve to explain Hord's (1997) findings. Coming as no surprise, almost anti-climatically, Hord (1997), Stoll, et al. (2003) and Jackson and Street cite research linking PLC's and collaborative enquiry to improved academic performance.

Schools

Teacher growth and enhanced student outcomes interweave to further institutional adaptivity, reculturation, continuous improvement, a collective focus on pupil learning and the creation of new organisational knowledge (Stoll, et al., 2003). Similarly, Bezzina (2006) notes 'rather than being a reform initiative, a PLC becomes the supporting structure for schools to continuously transform themselves through their own internal capacity' (p. 164). Additionally, Jackson and Street (2005) submit that continued collaboration proves important in sustaining the changes.

MEASUREMENT OF PLC: DIAGNOSE AND EVALUATE

We live in an age of compliance and evidence, based on measurable evaluation, and so we must measure the PLC. The evaluation instruments below, only briefly described, but accessible, can often serve to both diagnose and evaluate a PLC. As a PLC develops, an analysis tool could provide indicators of strengths and weaknesses and future directions for site-based administrators to ponder. After the PLC emerges, the tool becomes evaluative for researchers, stakeholders and perhaps funding agencies. In the end, any evaluation should aim to support and enhance a PLC's development and to contribute to continuous learning and school improvement.

Hord, et al. (1999) describe the development of an instrument to assess the implementation of a PLC among staff. The instrument presents 17 judgment descriptors grouped around Hord's (1997, 1998) five major dimensions, or criteria, of a PLC. The rubric format allows a 1-5 judgment range and fulfills quality standards of usability, reliability and validity. The article gives examples, but not a complete rubric.

Similarly, Hipp, et al. (2003) offer an instrument with 45 descriptor statements and a 1-4 graduation of judgment responses to assess perceptions of staff, principals and stakeholders (parents and community members). The instrument, developed by Oliver, Hipp and Hoffman (as cited in Hipp, et al., 2003, p. 29), based on Hord's (1997, 1998) five dimensions of a PLC, is presented in its entirety in their paper's Appendix C. In Appendix D of their paper, Hipp, et al. provide guide interview questions for a research project, also based on Hord's (1997, 1998) dimensions. The research project could equally serve as a PLC evaluation or as a diagnostic tool as schools work toward reform efforts.

In their case study analysis, Liebman, Maldonado, Lacey, Candace and Thompson (2005) use semi-structured, qualitative interviews with the principal, the administration team and key faculty members to gather data. Their paper reports the interview findings. The interview protocols/questions, based on criteria honed from literature, are attached in their appendices.

With an unrelenting focus on student achievement, DuFour (2004) and Kanold (2006) examine the processes undertaken with the 4,000 students of Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. In their view, individual teachers and/or each faculty and/or the whole school gather baseline data of student formative assessment, analyse the data, and set SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) goals for improvement. Coordinated assessment and reporting programmes unflinchingly monitor student progress.

Adapting the instruments and techniques outlined, either slightly or extensively, could afford a ready-made and reasonably site-specific measurement tool for New Zealand schools. Furthermore, with the shift to standards-based assessment in recent years, it seems realistic to suppose that New Zealand educators possess the capability to establish criteria for a PLC, or use those dimensions delineated in the literature, and to construct judgment statements or interview questions which accurately evaluate the PLC's level of attainment for a customised and site-specific analysis.

IMPLICATIONS: THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG – A MODEL WITHOUT A MODEL

The creation of a PLC, like the creation of the universe, creates a lot more wobbling and banging about than may appear on the surface. Too many dynamics, too many factors, too many people and too many imponderables generate unpredictable and complex variables on the pathway to the PLC: each site differs in culture, leadership, systemic and structural variations, personnel and resourcing.

Compounding the unfathomable combinations of variations, there are difficult questions around which PLC attribute evolves first: Does leadership set a direction first, or does the organisational culture change first? How conceptually intertwined are culture and leadership? Must structural adaptations precede all other attributes? As a consequence, it proves difficult to isolate any single critical factor as prerequisite to the formation of a PLC. The degree of variables and the complexity of the questions fail to suggest a set formula for establishing a PLC. As a result, the pathway might be described as a model without a model.

Perhaps the answer to what comes first in developing a PLC lurks in a most elemental and fundamental building block: people. Cultural shifts will happen when people collaborate and share, in constructive and trusting relationships, in small and incremental ways. When people benefit from collaboration, culture evolves and leadership will orchestrate, and a PLC emerges from the smallest units in the organisation, the individual staff members; a revolution from below.

If change emerges from the ground up, in small behaviours and needing trust, perhaps initiating the simplest and least intrusive of specific practices may prove most effective in the launching of a PLC. Specific practices could include:

- mentoring systems
- joint planning and assessment opportunities
- provision for video-based reflections on practice
- extending staff input into the planning and running of meetings on professional matters
- formation of study groups to investigate and address real site-based issues
- staff debate and decision making.

This list of specific practices is not exhaustive or prescribed, only indicative of what may be considered, yet site-dependent, based on existing leadership, culture and systemic structures.

The ultimate starting point for the formation of a PLC is neither the "chicken nor the egg". Instead, perhaps the guiding strategy for the PLC model without a model lay somewhere near an unauthenticated, yet indicative story, about Franklin Roosevelt's mandate to his cabinet in 1933. Roosevelt was elected to resolve the unprecedented and monumental economic and social dislocation caused by the onset of the "Great Depression". He assembled his cabinet for the first time in an emergency meeting and ordered them to "try something and if that doesn't work, try something else and something else again, until it does work". And so began the most extensive and the most unparalleled socio-economic revolution in 20th century American history.

REFERENCES

Bambino, D. (2002). Critical friends. *Educational Leadership, 59*(6), 25-28.

Bezzina, C. (2006). 'The Road Less Traveled': Professional communities in secondary schools. *Theory Into Practice, 45*(2), 159-167.

Billington, D. (1996). Seven characteristics of highly effective adult learning programs. New horizons for learning. Retrieved July 10, 2007, from http://www.newhorizons.org/lifelong/workplace/billington.htm

Bullough, R.V. (2007). Professional leaning communities and the eight year study. *Educational Horizons, 85*(3), 168-180.

Carver, C. L. (2004). A new lifeline for teachers. *Educational Leadership, 61*(8), 58-61.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1996). The quiet revolution: Rethinking teacher development. *Educational Leadership, 53*(6), 4-10.

DuFour, R. (2004). What is a "Professional Learning Community"? *Educational Leadership, 61*(8), 6-11.

Fullan, A., & Hargreaves, A. (1996). *What's Worth Fighting for in Your School?* New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Haberman, M. (2004). Can star teachers create learning communities? *Educational Leadership, 61*(8), 52-56.

Hipp, K., Stoll, L., Bolam, R., Wallace, M., McMahon, A. Thomas, S., & Huffman, J. (2003). *An international perspective on the development of learning communities.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association Chicago, Illinois, April 21-25, 2003. Retrieved June 22, 2007, from ERIC database.

Hord, S.M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.* Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Retrieved June 22, 2007, from ERIC database.

Hord, S. M. (1998). Creating a Professional Learning Community: Cottonwood Creek School. *Issues … about Change, 6*(2), 1-9. Retrieved June 22, 2007, from ERIC database.

Hord, S.M., Meehan, M. L., Orletsky, S., & Sattes, B. (1999). Assessing a school staff as a community of professional learners. *Issues … about Change, 7*,(1), 1-9. Retrieved June 22, 2007, from ERIC database.

Induction into learning communities. (2005, August). Washington, DC: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Retrieved June 18, 2007 from ERIC database.

Jackson, D. & Street, H. (2005). What does 'collaborative enquiry' look like? In H. Street & J. Temperly (Eds.), *Improving schools through collaborative enquiry* (pp. 41-70). London, England: Continuum.

Jianping, S., Zhen, J., & Poppink, S. (2007). Open lessons: A practice to develop a learning community. *Educational Horizons, 85*(3), 181-191.

Kanold, T. D. (2006). The flywheel effect. *Journal of Staff Development, 27*(2), 16-23.

Lieb, S. (1991). Principles of adult learning. *Vision* (Fall). Retrieved July 10, 2007, from http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/communities/ FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2

Liebman, H., Maldonado, N., Lacey, K., Candace, H., & Thompson, S. (2005). [Address]. *An investigation of leadership in a professional learning community: A case study of a large, suburban, public middle school*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Florida Educational Research Association (Miami, FL, Nov 2005). Retrieved June 16, 2007, from ERIC database.

Ministry of Education. (November, 2006). *Towards a framework for professional practice: INSTEP*. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/instep

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1996). *Leadership for the schoolhouse*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Stoll, L., Fink, D., & Earl, L. (2003). *It's about learning*. New York, U.S.A.: Routledge Farmer.

Van Horn, L. (2006). Re-imagining professional development. *Voices from the Middle, 13*(4), 58-64.

AUTHOR PROFILE

John Hellner

John Hellner

John Hellner is a teacher educator for the University of Waikato at Tauranga, delivering the Graduate Diploma of Teaching (secondary). He first became interested in Professional Learning Communities through animated discussions with University staff and private consultants working in learning institutions to implement the Ministry of Education's draft document *Towards a Framework for Professional Practice: INSTEP*.

Email

jhellner@waikato.ac.nz