

The Existence of Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities in Schools and Its Influence on Teacher Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

The concept of the Professional Learning Community places its focus squarely on providing support for instruction through a collaborative process in which educators come together in a non-threatening manner to share best practices and search for means of improving student achievement. The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine if teacher job satisfaction is enhanced when characteristics of a Professional Learning Community exist within schools. An analysis of the data revealed that when characteristics of a Professional Learning Community existed within schools, teacher job satisfaction improved. The findings support the assumption that the environment for teachers created by the existence of a Professional Learning Community not only has merit, but enhances teacher job satisfaction.

Keywords: learning communities; teacher job satisfaction; school environment

Over the past century, the American educational system has endured a number of educational reforms. While these reform efforts have indeed been noble, substantial gaps in educational achievement persist among America's students. In today's global economy, more than ever before, student deficiencies and shortcomings on standardized testing are under the microscope. Many individuals in the public and business sectors are demanding that a better-quality student be molded in America's public schools. They are demanding scholars who are prepared to compete on a global platform and lead America into the new age of "globalization." Some individuals believe that a critical part of improving America's education rests with improvements in the environments of schools and classrooms (Clay, Soldwedel, & Many, 2011; Dufour, R. & Dufour, R., 2006; Hord, 2009).

In many schools today, there are "pockets of excellence." These pockets are often left to their own devices, and principals and their faculties never share their respective best practices. In a number of schools, these acts of "isolation" have been accepted as the norm. However, the time

has come for administrators to transform their schools into collaborative, professional atmospheres where trust and sharing are expected. Consequently, relative to the need to improve the academic achievement of all students, the school environment has become an intriguing part of the discussion. From those discussions, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have become the most agreed upon community environment where educators function if they are seeking to improve teaching and student performance (Dufour, R. & Dufour, R., 2006). When the school community operates as a true community, a learner-centered atmosphere is the result, enabling teachers and administrators to profoundly impact achievement for their students (Hord, 2009). Fullan (2011) states, “The research has been clear and consistent for over 30 years—collaborative cultures in which teachers focus on improving their teaching practice, learn from each other, and are well led and supported by school principals result in better learning for students” (p.2).

Review of Literature

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

In a Professional Learning Community (PLC), the needs of educators are a top priority. Educators are afforded the opportunity to have professional learning embedded in the culture of the school, and faculty members learn from each other. The PLC functions on the premise that no one member is above the other; rather, everyone can benefit from the knowledge and experiences of their colleagues (Jessie, 2007). Barth (2006) argues that to strengthen the art of teaching, leaders should establish a collegial culture where professionals feel comfortable conversing about their practice, sharing best practices, teaching knowledge, and observing and cheering for each other. In the absence of the aforementioned qualities, there will not be significant growth in schools; rather, there is likely to be ineffective teacher leadership, no curriculum improvement, and very little sustained change (Hirsh, 2012).

The PLC functions under the premise of three big ideas (Dufour, R., Eaker, & DuFour R., 2005). The first idea is making a paradigm shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning with a mission of ensuring that all students learn. With this shift, the result is an enhanced emphasis on learning and assessment that provides a much needed leverage in teaching (Schmoker, 2006). This is a simple, yet highly effective move that impacts learning. Educators understand that student learning hinges on their own personal learning and that the learning process is an intentional one that is important for the school community to embrace (Hirsh, 2012).

The second of the three big ideas is a culture of collaboration. Educators who are participants in a PLC embrace the fact that they must work together to achieve a common purpose; this purpose is learning for all (Dufour, R., Eaker, & DuFour R., 2005). This idea acknowledges the likelihood that student learning greatly increases the continuous learning of adults. Most important, adults learn how students learn. This requires teachers to become collaborative, rather than to work isolated, to be entrenched in best practices backed by research, and to become well-versed in a sound means of assessing learning (Clay, Soldwedel, & Many, 2011). However, school leaders must provide time for teachers to collaborate. Time for collaboration may be more important than other aspects of school, such as equipment, facilities, or even staff development; collaboration affords teachers time to engage in practice-based

learning, such as peer observations and utilizing running records. The designation and protection of time for teachers to collaborate during the course of the regular school day are critical if a culture of collaboration is to be developed (Khorsheed, 2007; Many, 2009).

The third big idea is a school's focus on results (Dufour, R., Eaker, & DuFour R., 2005). Knowledge acquired from focusing on results will ultimately contribute to judging the effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community in a school. Attention is not placed on the communities' intentions, but rather on the results of the actions of members of the community. Programs and initiatives in the school community have to be continuously assessed (Jessie, 2007). The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009) states that teachers must learn to respond to data, be equally accountable, and use the data to inform their instructional practices. Teachers should be enthusiastic about what the data says and then determine what they must do collectively.

School Climate

The National School Climate Center defines school climate as the "quality and character of school life" (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Center reports point out that the climate of a school is characterized by the routine experiences of students, parents, and school personnel who function in the life of the school. This is evident in the norms, goals, values, relationships, and structures of the organization. Additionally, a school climate can be characterized as consisting of the quality of interpersonal relations that exist between students and teachers, the perceived safety of the school, the extent to which all stakeholders feel they are involved in decision making, and the level of expectations for student learning (Kozina et.al, 2008).

In schools where high performance is evident, principals are influential in creating a sense of community. They are implementing and promoting an effective model of the Professional Learning Community. The relationships that are evident in the climate of these schools are heavily impacted by the principal (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). They construct teams of teachers and leaders around the concepts of academic achievement, school culture, and capacity building. Ultimately, it is the duty of the school's principal to ensure that the learning environment is consistent with a culture of teaching and learning.

A positive school climate is synonymous with less emotional and behavioral problems for students. This type of climate cultivates encouraging educational and psychological results for not only students, but also for school employees (Marshall, 2004). It has a definite effect on the level of satisfaction a teacher has with his/her employment and greatly influences retention (Cohen, 2010). When the climate is positive, a teacher bonds with the school, develops a feeling of safety, develops positive relationships with students, and interacts with fellow adults. Each of these factors is linked to the amount of job satisfaction a teacher feels while working in a particular school environment.

Factors that Influence Teacher Job Satisfaction

Teachers are the very foundation upon which any nation's educational programs are built (Nadim, Chaudhry, Kalyar, & Riaz, 2012). The role teachers play in building the educational future for students throughout the world is essential to success and improvement of the

educational system. According to a Met-Life-Teacher's Survey (2011), teachers are acknowledged as the single, most critical, school-related factor to a child's success in school. Teachers prepare students for the rigors of post-secondary education and/or job readiness. All of these expectations are becoming higher, even with a diverse learning population appearing in today's schools. Teachers who have a sense of satisfaction in their jobs perform well in the classroom, and the quality of teaching continues to improve over time. They become more creative and show a greater sense of commitment to becoming better teachers. Consequently, teacher job satisfaction is a primary concern for school leaders.

Teacher quality and satisfaction rank considerably high as indicators of overall student success and are undeniably linked with the teacher's perception of the environment in which he or she works. There is compelling evidence in the research that suggests that when teachers feel good about the work in which they are involved and feel a sense of happiness in their working conditions, a by-product is that the learning process for students is positively affected (Ali, Zaman, Tabassum, & Iqbal, 2011; Lee, 2006).

Professional Learning Communities can contribute greatly, both collectively and individually, to the success of teachers and the school (Habegger, 2008). With the establishment of PLC's, there is: (1) a reduction of teacher isolation; (2) an increased commitment to achieving the mission and vision of the school; (3) a sharing of best practices between teachers; (4) an improvement in the content knowledge of teachers; (5) a higher school morale; (6) an increase in teacher job satisfaction; (7) a better teacher retention rate, and (8) an increase in the positive energy of personnel (Breakthrough Collaborative, 2012; Riddile, 2013; The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009).

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the existence of characteristics of a Professional Learning Community in their schools and the relationships between the existence of those characteristics and their job satisfaction. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers perceive that characteristics of a Professional Learning Community exist within their school?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between teachers' perceptions of the existence of characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and the level of their job satisfaction?

The researchers utilized the *Professional Learning Community and Teacher Job Satisfaction Survey* to collect data on the perception of teachers regarding the existence of characteristics of a Professional Learning Community in their schools and the levels of teacher job satisfaction. A correlational research design was used to determine the relationship, if any, that existed between characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and teacher job satisfaction.

Population Studied

The researchers selected 12 high schools in four counties in the Southeast region of the United States. One hundred seventeen (117) teachers were surveyed in the 12 schools. Convenient sampling was used in school and teacher selection.

Data Collection

Data were collected to assess the extent to which teachers perceived that characteristics of a Professional Learning Community existed in their schools and their levels of job satisfaction using the *Professional Learning Community and Teacher Job Satisfaction Survey*. The standardized survey administered online asked teachers to respond to twenty questions using a Likert-type scale. Fifteen of the questions addressed characteristics of a Professional Learning Community (1-15), and 5 of the questions (16-20) addressed teacher job satisfaction. The specific questions are listed in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Quantitative methods were used to determine the extent to which teachers perceived that characteristics of a Professional Learning Community existed in their schools. Correlational analyses were used to determine the significant relationship(s) among variables and to answer research question two.

Results

Teachers indicated that all 16 characteristics existed in their schools. However, some characteristics were more in existence than others. The four characteristics that were most in existence were:

- The principal takes initiative and addresses areas where support is needed for faculty and staff.
- The principal encourages and supports the development of teacher leaders.
- Student learning is the constant focus of teachers and other educators in the school.
- The principal shares the vision for school improvement with an unwavering focus on student learning.

Teachers reported that the four characteristics that were least in existence were:

- Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring to take place in the school.
- Opportunities exist for faculty to observe peers and to offer feedback and encouragement.
- The faculty and staff collaboratively review student work for the purpose of sharing to improve instructional practices.
- The school schedule allots time for the collective learning and shared practice of teachers.

The extents to which all sixteen characteristics exist appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and Teacher Job Satisfaction: Survey Questions

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and Teacher Job Satisfaction: Survey Questions	Percentage of Don't Agree	Percentage of Agree	Percentage of Strongly Agree
1. Faculty and staff are consistently involved in planning and decision making on most school issues.	18.8 %	61.5%	18.8%
2. The principal takes initiative and addresses areas where support is needed for faculty and staff.	6.8%	50.4%	42.7%
3. The principal encourages and supports the development of teacher leaders.	6.8%	40.2%	52.1%
4. Student learning is the constant focus of teachers and other educators in the school.	6.0%	44.4%	48.7%
5. Decision are made in alignment with the school's mission and vision.	8.5%	57.3%	33.3%
6. The principal shares the vision for school improvement with an unwavering focus on student learning.	2.6%	45.3%	52.1%
7. Collegial relationships exist amongst the faculty and staff that reflect a focus on student learning.	3.4%	65.0%	29.9%
8. A trusting relationship exists between the teacher/ principal and the faculty.	9.4%	64.1%	26.5%
	6.8%	63.2%	29.1%

9. The faculty and staff work collaboratively to seek knowledge, skills, and best practices and apply the new learning to their work.	17.1%	60.7%	21.4%
10. Time is provided for faculty and staff to collaboratively discuss best practices.	35.9%	53.0%	10.3%
11. The school schedule allots time for the collective learning and shared practices of teachers.	17.9%	69.2%	12.8%
12. Teacher isolation is reduced.	28.%	55.6%	15.4%
13. The faculty and staff collaboratively review student work for the purpose of sharing to improve instructional practices.	42.7%	45.3%	11.1%
14. Opportunities exist for faculty to observe peers and to offer feedback and encouragement.	22.2%	60.7%	16.2%
15. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring to take place in the school.	11.1%	48.7%	38.5%
16. I am currently satisfied with my teaching position.	7.7%	49.6%	40.2%
17. Teaching at this school provides me with a great amount of personal satisfaction.	12.%	42.7%	43.6%
18. If I had the opportunity to leave this school, it would not be because of factors relative to the internal school community in which I work.	4.3%	55.6%	39.3%
19. I am currently satisfied with the relationships and collaboration that exist between myself and my colleagues.	6.0%	41.9%	50.4%
20. I like to teach at this school.			

Teacher Job Satisfaction

Five of the questions on the survey were designed to answer the second research question: “What is the relationship, if any, between teachers’ perceptions of the existence of characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and the level of their job satisfaction?” Eighty-eight percent of teachers reported currently being satisfied with their teaching position; 96% of teachers indicated that teaching at their school provided them with a great amount of personal satisfaction; 88% of teachers indicated that if they had the opportunity to leave their current school, it would not be because of factors relative to the internal school community in which they worked; 92% of teachers reported being currently satisfied with the relationships and collaboration that existed between themselves and their colleagues, and 94% of teachers indicated that they liked teaching at their school. The results of the five questions on job satisfaction appear in Table 1, questions 16-20.

In analyzing the data to answer question two, the data showed a significant correlation between the perceived existence of PLC characteristics and teacher job satisfaction. The mean of 12 out of 15 questions concerning the characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and the mean of 4 out of 5 questions regarding teacher satisfaction had a Pearson correlation level of .553. These results appear in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2

Correlations

		Mean of Professional Learning Community (12 of 15)	Mean of Satisfaction (4 of 5)
Mean of Professional Learning Community (12 of 15)	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 117	.553 ** .000
Mean of Satisfaction (4 of 5)	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.553** .000 115	1 115

Table 3

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Mean of Professional Learning Community (12 of 15)	117	2.1252	.39045	.03610
Mean of Satisfaction (4 of 5)	115	2.3470	.50373	.04697

The study sought to determine the extent to which teachers in twelve schools perceive that characteristics of a Professional Learning Community exist within their school. Analysis of the data revealed that most teachers responding to the survey perceived that the characteristics exist. Some teachers reported strongly perceiving that the characteristics exist, and a small percentage of teachers reported that they do not perceive that the characteristics exist at all. Over 93% of teachers believed that their principal takes initiative and addresses areas where support is needed for faculty and staff. This finding is consistent with the literature as the literature states that teacher/ principal relationships are major factors in enhancing student achievement. More than 92% of teachers perceived that their principal encourages and supports the development of teacher leaders. Last, 93% of teachers believed student learning is the constant focus of teachers and other educators in the school. These characteristics speak to principal/teacher relationships and mirror the literature reports in regard to a critical area in school improvement.

Seventy-six percent of teachers felt opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring to take place in their school. Sixty-three percent of the respondents reported that their school schedule allotted time for the collective learning and shared practice of teachers, and 56% of teachers reported that opportunities existed for faculty to observe peers and to offer feedback and encouragement. This teacher perception data show that school leaders are addressing areas that directly impact teaching and learning. Within the structure of the PLC, members openly share similar goals, practices, beliefs, interests, and value systems which empower them to act as a unified body that strategically and collaboratively labor together to achieve a chosen endeavor (Ryan, 2011).

The areas where teachers reported not perceiving the existence of characteristics at all were: (1) opportunities for coaching and mentoring; (2) opportunities for faculty to observe peers and offer feedback and encouragement; (3) the faculty and staff collaboratively reviewing student work for the purpose of sharing to improve instructional practices, and (4) the school schedule allotting time for the collective learning and shared practice of teachers. These areas

speak directly to collaboration, peer support, and instructional planning, all critical areas that lead to instructional improvement. It is imperative that teacher learning cover the content and activities needed to ensure that the knowledge and skills they acquire lead to their overall effectiveness in student learning (Hirsh, 2012). Principals in these schools would be well advised to make adjustments in their instructional practices.

Research question number two asked: “What is the relationship, if any, between teacher perception of the existence of characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and the level of their job satisfaction?” The data showed a significant correlation between the perceived existence of characteristics of Professional Learning Communities and teacher job satisfaction. The mean of 12 out of 15 questions concerning the characteristics of a Professional Learning Community and the mean of 4 out of 5 questions regarding teacher satisfaction had a Pearson correlation level of .553. The results of the study are consistent with the literature on the environment of the school and teacher job satisfaction. School leaders must ensure that the environment of the school and classroom is conducive to teaching and learning. If the environment contains characteristics of a Professional Learning Community, teacher job satisfaction is greater. Constantly focusing on teachers and other educators in the school encourages sharing shares the vision for school improvement with an unwavering focus on student learning. As identified in the literature, giving the faculty and staff instructional support and encouraging their development are characteristics that lead to school improvement and teacher job satisfaction.

Conclusions

Professional Learning Communities are based on the assumption that collective learning and problem solving are key to improving educator and student performance (Hughes, 2007). This study provided a real-life analysis concerning teachers’ perceptions of the existence of characteristics of a Professional Learning Community in their schools and the relationship between the existence of these characteristics and their job satisfaction. Inevitably, the hope is that in schools where this type of collaboration occurs, the school culture will be indicative of a thriving micro-society, and the level of job satisfaction will be high among the professionals who reside in that school. Educators in today’s schools certainly have a monumental task set before them. The diverse learners and needs of those learners dictate a well versed and highly qualified teacher who has a mindset of continuous improvement. Cowan (2009) proclaims that Professional Learning Communities provide the infrastructure that builds up and nurtures continuous improvement among teachers and provides an avenue by which they can achieve high levels of student achievement.

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