

*REVIEW*

# **The professional learning community in special education schools: The principal's role**

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Accepted 21 August, 2013

**The concept of a professional learning community is characterized by the networks of learning processes which exist among its members, where teachers continuously deliberate with one another on how to solve problems that relate to teaching and learning. Interestingly, whereas a growing number of studies have focused on how to promote collective thinking and learning networks among general public school teachers, as well as between general and special education personnel in inclusive contexts, the notion of professional learning communities has not been explicitly deliberated and empirically investigated in the context of special education schools. The present article attempts to fill in this gap in the professional literature and explore the concept of a professional learning community in special education schools. The conceptual framework of the professional learning community is described, followed by an explanation of the importance of learning communities in special education, focusing on the principal's role in nurturing a learning community in special education schools.**

**Key words:** Professional learning community, special education, principals.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 19th century, Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management (e.g., division of labor, hierarchy and control, impersonal orientation) have dominated the procedures and structures of state schools in western society. Sergiovanni (2005) argued that schools have been perceived as rational institutions based on bureaucratic characteristics which were nurtured during the industrial age, a mechanistic view that has been sharply criticized by researchers and practitioners alike (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006). This criticism addresses the concern that creating and sustaining learning opportunities for the growth and development of teachers are of the utmost importance if teachers are to be accountable for the growth and development of their students. Therefore, a teacher working in isolation should take steps towards

interactive professionalism, where teachers continuously deliberate with one another on how to solve problems that relate to teaching and learning (Fullan, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006).

Contrary to teachers' pedagogical isolation-autonomy, which so often prevails in schools, a professional learning community is defined by the networks of learning processes which transpire among its members (Andrews and Crowther, 2006; Huffman, 2000; Mitchell and Sackney, 2006; Roy and Hord, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006). In order to achieve such processes, efforts have been made to transform the bureaucratic perspective prevailing in schools into a more collaborative learning perspective, where teachers learn together and coordinate their efforts toward improved student learning (DuFour, 2004).

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The special education field contains two main types of settings: segregated special education schools, and inclusive schools that co-enroll regular and special education students. This article focuses on the self-contained special education schools (educating children with disabilities whose needs cannot be met in ordinary or inclusive classrooms). In each special education school, a varied staff of teachers, paramedical teachers, assistants, and administrators (principal, vice principal, department coordinators) must work collaboratively and communicate continuously to assure optimal functioning of the child with disabilities over the course of the entire school day. This requires an organizational structure which establishes learning networks for joint thinking and learning aimed at enhancing students' welfare (Reiter, 1994). Whereas a growing number of studies have been conducted focusing on how to promote collective thinking and learning networks among general public school teachers, as well as between general and special education personnel in inclusive contexts (Kozleski et al., 2000), the notion of the professional learning community has not been explicitly deliberated and empirically investigated in special education schools.

Therefore, the present article attempts to address this lacuna in the professional literature by exploring the concept of the professional learning community in special education schools. We begin by describing the conceptual framework of the professional learning community, followed by a presentation of the importance of learning communities in special education, based on the existing literature. Finally, we focus on the principal's role in nurturing a learning community in special education schools.

## THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Historically, the system of public education was constructed based on what Richard Elmore has called 'the ethic of atomized teaching': autonomous teachers who close the doors of their classrooms and teach what they wish and as they wish (Whitehurst, 2002). In other words, the teaching profession is a highly isolated profession in which teachers are expected to handle their own students and make any necessary adjustments to ensure that students in the classroom make academic and social gains (Dukes and Lamar-Dukes, 2007).

As traditional hierarchical models of school administration contrast with the advocated value of social exchange, researchers have argued for the reorganization of schools into professional webs of interactions (Louis, 2006), thereby reculturing schools into professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004). Rosenholtz (1989) found that "developing" schools, wherein teachers learn from each other through mutual sharing, are more effective than "stuck" schools that have difficulties

implementing changes. Similarly, Louis (2006) argued that schools' capacity for innovation and reform depends on their ability to collectively process, understand, and apply knowledge concerning teaching and learning. Therefore, to revise their existing knowledge and keep pace with environmental changes, schools must establish structures, processes, and practices that facilitate the continuous collaborative learning of all their members (Silins and Mulford, 2002). Such collaborative learning, in turn, is expected to enhance professional development that may help break down teacher isolation barriers, alter teaching practices, and contribute to student learning (Andrews and Lewis, 2002; Hipp et al., 2003; Huffman and Hipp, 2001; Mitchell and Sackney, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006).

DuFour et al. (2005), and Roy and Hord (2006) identified the following core characteristics of a professional learning community: (a) collective learning, consisting of reflective dialogue focusing on instruction and student learning, where teachers reflect on instructional practices and examine tacit assumptions about teaching and learning; (b) deprivatization of practice, where teachers provide feedback through networks of professional interactions and share knowledge beyond their own classrooms (e.g., become mentors); (c) peer collaboration, where teachers collaborate on school projects that focus on professional reform and improvement initiatives. Collaborative teams engage in action research and collective inquiry into the important questions of teaching and learning; thus, continuous improvement cycles are built into the routine practices of the school; and (d) shared leadership and facilitative-supportive actions on the part of the principal and the administration. While all four of these core characteristics are interrelated and should be aligned to produce the capacity for a professional learning community, no single method can be applied to all schools wishing to create such a community.

Growing evidence suggests that extensive use of collaborative learning mechanisms related to curriculum and instruction promotes greater teacher commitment and student engagement in school practices (Cowan, 2006). Similarly, in a study in Israeli elementary schools (Schechter, 2008), collaborative learning mechanisms were positively related to both teachers' sense of collective efficacy and teachers' commitment to their school. However, collaborative learning mechanisms were negatively related to the level of change in the system's properties as a core dimension of perceived environmental uncertainty. Moreover, collegial learning increased teachers' inquiry into instructional materials and practices within the school, which, in turn, facilitated the use of innovative pedagogical methods that were consistent with school reforms (Printy, 2008). In a recent qualitative study, Schechter (2012) explored teachers', principals', and superintendents' perceptions of inhibiting

and fostering factors of the professional learning community. The principals and the teachers indicated that overwork, a lack of resources, and top to bottom commands were factors which inhibited the professional learning community. The superintendents, on their part, related to the principal's leadership style as a central factor in fostering the professional learning community.

Although the concept of the professional learning community has come to the forefront of school change discourse (Roy and Hord, 2006), learning communities can perpetuate practitioners' skepticism towards any kind of communal learning, since the social arrangements by which teachers share and create knowledge are fraught with competition for professional legitimacy and political power, often inhibiting authentic interaction. Since legitimacy is conferred by its stakeholders, rather than given automatically to individuals or a group, learning in the communal arena can induce fear and vulnerability in light of possible changes in members' perceived professional legitimacy. Furthermore, time is perhaps the most salient issue in the context of productive collegial interactions (Collinson and Cook, 2007), but due to teachers' heavy workloads, these interactions generally turn into mere updating mechanisms. Especially at the age of accountability and high-stakes standards, administrators tend to colonize the blocks of time allocated for collaborative learning and use them to advance their administrative agenda, instead of focusing on instructional practices (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006).

Although the notion of the professional learning community has come to the forefront of both regular and inclusive educational settings' change discourse (Roy and Hord, 2006), as mentioned earlier, it is seldom translated into structures and processes in school reality (DuFour et al., 2005; Hipp et al., 2003). Thus, despite the accumulation of literature regarding the structure and culture that either facilitate or inhibit the productive learning community, teachers and principals are still in need of practical theories/guidelines to assist them in negotiating their professional practices. Precisely for this reason, special education schools, with their unique characteristics and particularly pronounced needs for collaborative learning as a means of assisting in the advancement of each individual student, may shed light on the practical application of the professional learning community's theoretical framework.

## **THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS**

The difference between regular and special education systems is not only a question of quantity, but rather mainly one of quality (Cook and Schirmer, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004). Thus, to address the typical needs and often unresponsive nature of the students that it serves, special

education has traditionally involved providing something "extra" and "different" (Cook and Schirmer, 2003; Dukes and Lamar-Dukes, 2007). Special education schools have thus been challenged to meet both the intent and the spirit of federal laws regarding the education of students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004; Turnbull and Cilley, 1999).

Kirk (1953) delineated eight features that distinguish special education from general education: (a) special class organization, (b) special materials, (c) special diagnoses of the special education student, (d) special clinical teaching procedures, (e) intensive use of learning principles, (f) systematic instruction, (g) individualized instruction, and (h) parent education. More recently, Hallahan and Kauffman (2000) summarized seven features, underlying special education: (a) individualized instruction, (b) carefully sequenced series of tasks, (c) emphasis on stimulation and awakening of the child's senses, (d) meticulous arrangement of the child's environment, (e) immediate reward for correct performance, (f) tutoring in functional skills, and (g) belief that every child should be educated to the highest level possible.

Thus, a major unique characteristic of special education is the relationship between the teacher/educator and the child with disabilities (Sachs et al., 1992), aimed at rehabilitating and preparing the child for a normative life. In special education, the need for teachers to identify appropriate content and pedagogy for each individual student is a hallmark, codified in federal legislation (Connery, 2000). Thus, special education pedagogy utilizes a functional approach that determines how to teach a child and to encourage his or her development in disciplines that will be useful for his or her future daily life (Sachs et al., 1992). The curriculum must cater to specific needs arising from a particular disability (e.g., motor skills for cerebral palsy or communication skills for pervasive developmental disorder), must be based on the learner's strengths, and must flexibly allow varied learning styles in the classroom (Kirk and Gallagher, 1983).

As opposed to the standard perceptions in general education, which focus exclusively on pedagogy and content knowledge, the special education field develops standards while taking into account the knowledge and skills necessary for the student's appropriate interactions with family and community members (CEC, 1998). This expanded focus stems from the uniqueness of special education and the students it serves: developing content standards for a population that is so widely heterogeneous in terms of the ability to achieve predetermined grade levels would not be very effective (De-Valenzuela et al., 2000).

Special education schoolwork involves the multi-disciplinary nature of each child's educational-therapeutic team, comprised of a diverse staff of teachers, vocational teachers, assistants, and administrators (Sachs et al.,

1992). As mentioned earlier, these teams must cooperate and communicate among themselves continuously to assure the student's optimal functioning (Glatthorn, 1990; Messer, 1992). In other words, sharing information among staff members increases the possibility of accurately assessing the child's difficulties and determining the optimal intervention (Reiter, 1994). Such collaborative learning requires each member of the staff to diagnose the child's problem, state his or her professional view in front of other staff members, and participate in the deliberation processes concerning decisions such as appropriate subject matter to be taught, supervision of the student, and improvements and modifications of didactic instruments (Sachs et al., 1992).

Teaching special education population involves developing course content, preparing class materials, using a variety of instructional methods, and evaluating student learning and instructor effectiveness (Ludlow and Wienke, 1995). Therefore, teachers have been encouraged to work more with their colleagues and access the expertise they need in order to improve (Hargreaves, 2000). Moreover, educators in special education regularly use study groups as a means of challenging and integrating their thinking, as well as progressing to new and joint levels of understanding. These collegial conversations give rise to new and better instructional practices.

Professional learning about teaching is not simply a matter of propositional knowledge or knowing about a range of teaching strategies. In order to maintain the high quality of services that students with disabilities require, special education teachers need a structure that provides continuous support (Broom, 1996). Thus, teachers and other staff members in the field of special education often express their need for professional development. Gersten et al. (1995) indicate that professional development which encourages interactions with other teachers who are engaged in similar work is critical to the job satisfaction of the special education teacher. Put differently, the challenges of teaching students with disabilities require an ongoing commitment to collaborative professional learning (Lashley and Boscardin, 2003).

In the special education system, learning networks are a core organizational feature of effective schoolwork, that is, special education has a unique structure since it requires much cooperation between various professionals (e.g., paramedics, psychologists, teachers, assistants, administrators). So many diverse professionals involved in the educational and therapeutic processes of the disabled child need a daily channel of communication and interaction in order to achieve their goals. For example, in Israeli schools serving adolescents with developmental delays on the autistic spectrum (pervasive developmental disorder/autism), classes are usually divided according to age level and according to level of functioning (low, intermediate, high). Four staff members teach each class over the school day: a teacher and an

assistant who work together during the morning hours all week long, and a different teacher/assistant team who work together during the afternoon hours all week long. Thus, at all times of day, classwork is coordinated by two staff members (a teacher and an assistant). Moreover, paramedical lessons (e.g., occupational therapy, hydrotherapy), and vocational lessons (e.g., carpentry) are part of the school's curriculum, requiring ongoing cooperation between faculty members.

## THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

As stated earlier, special education has a unique structure since it requires extensive cooperation between various professionals. This requires an organizational structure that establishes learning networks for joint thinking and learning to enhance students' welfare (Glatthorn, 1990; Reiter, 1994). In this regard, special education school leaders have been challenged to foster learning communities as a means for meeting both the intent and the spirit of federal laws regarding the education of students with disabilities (DiPaola and Wlather-Thomas, 2003).

Special education administration is located at the intersection of the special education and educational administration disciplines (Lashley and Boscardin, 2003). The principal and his or her administrative team decide on work settings, organize the work groups and co-ordinate all the school's activities. The same team decides on staff meetings and is responsible for implementing the decisions made in them. Furthermore, the principal and the teachers are constantly in touch with the students' parents and help in creating connections with community centers in order to integrate the exceptional child into society (Sachs et al., 1992). In summary, the special education field presents major challenges for school leaders (DiPaola and Wlather-Thomas, 2003).

The primary responsibility of school principals is to ensure that the educational needs and goals of all students are met. Research suggests that school principals are not sufficiently prepared for this responsibility due to a lack of special education coursework during their formal training and professional development (Bays, 2004; DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003). In addition, the funding needs are the responsibility of school principals, meaning that they must provide resources and budget management to ensure that all students in special education schools receive adequate support (O'Brien et al., 2006; Yell et al., 2003). Thus, service delivery mechanisms are becoming more difficult and complex to administer. Principals' practice therefore involves a continuum of concerns, including federal and state legislation, increasing demands for accountability, and diminishing resources for education.

Special education school principals play pivotal roles in

high-risk learning environments which address complex student achievement issues (Brookover et al., 1996; Wellisch et al., 1978). Competent leaders develop and sustain effective learning communities by making sure that the faculty and students have the support and resources they need to be successful (Glickman, 2002). They facilitate inquiry, collaboration, reflection and analysis to guarantee students' achievements, professional growth, and continuous program improvement (Gupton, 2003). They work proactively to avoid conflict by maintaining a variety of structures designed to facilitate ongoing home-school communication (DiPaola et al., 2004). When school leaders focus on fundamental instructional issues and provide ongoing collaborative professional development, academic outcomes for students with disabilities and others at risk improve (Benz et al., 2000; Brownell et al., 2005; Kearns et al., 1998; Klingner et al., 2001).

Teacher teaming represents an increasingly common attempt by school administrators to empower the broader faculty (O'Brian et al., 2006; Spillane et al., 2001). By recognizing local expertise and providing opportunities for master teachers to share their knowledge and skills (e.g., weekly "walk and talk" groups, monthly "guest lecture" seminars, classroom observations, systematic recruitment and mentoring of new teachers, and sponsored "lunch and learn" sessions), principals ensure that professional learning efforts are well suited to the context of special education schools (DiPaola et al., 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 1999).

The professional learning community is a key concept in improving teacher performance (Roy and Hord, 2006). Strategies for effective teaching are intended to be modeled by school administrators, in collaboration with classroom teachers, to improve specific teaching skills. The strategies to be utilized should be discussed by the teachers and the principal (in collaboration with an assistance and/or assessment team, if appropriate) and mutually agreed upon. The principal and the teachers should be jointly responsible for ensuring that the necessary resources are available for selected professional development activities (Picard, 2004).

Moreover, leadership by teachers is increasingly seen as a key to reforming schools and improving the teaching career (Berry and Ginsberg, 1990). Leadership that is distributed across the many roles and functions within the special education school might bring together the expertise of all those involved. In other words, for the special education distributed leadership team, this would include the common goal of meeting the needs of the special education teachers, special education programs, and the students within special education programs (O'Brien et al., 2006). If the team shares its knowledge, history, authority, and trust with others with a common goal, it can and will accomplish significant progress toward meeting the needs of students in special

education programs.

Special education principals should consider using cooperative professional development as a complementary framework to consultation processes. Cooperative professional development is a process which creates smaller "communities" of experienced teachers who work collaboratively for their own professional growth in different configurations (Cotton, 1996; Glatthorn, 1990; Molnar, 2002). In cooperative professional development, the participants see each other as equal collaborators for their mutual growth, organized into more intimate educational environments (and not as an expert advising a less well informed colleague). It can promote collaborative and collegial communities that, in turn, provide support for the teaching, and ultimately for the learning of all disabled students (Dukes and Lamar-Dukes, 2007; Supovitz, 2002). It seems that small groups of two, three or four people work better than larger teams, which are more difficult to manage (Glatthorn, 1990).

Although principals do not need to be disability experts, they must have fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks. Therefore, effective administrators need to develop a working knowledge about disabilities, and the unique learning and behavioral challenges of conditions that need to be overcome (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003). However, school principals often lack the knowledge needed to provide appropriate oversight of special education programs (Wakeman et al., 2006). Even more importantly, research reveals that school principals lack many of the skills needed to establish and support educational-professional teams in addressing special education's problems (Barnett and Monda-Amaya, 1998; Wakeman et al., 2006).

In one way or another, all the actions of effective principals in special education schools are geared toward providing teachers and specialists with the resources and support they need to do their jobs effectively (Bateman and Bateman, 2001; Thomas et al., 2001). By spending time in class, they learn about individual and school-wide professional development needs (DiPaola et al., 2004). In this regard, school principals must ultimately consider and utilize their school and community resources in a fashion that best enables teachers and staff to most readily perform their current educational roles (O'Brien et al., 2006). Once new principals are on the job, systematic mentoring at both the district and the single school levels help familiarize them with existing organizational expectations and district resources, procedures, and processes related to ongoing communication and collaboration (Lashley and Boscardin, 2003).

Research suggests that the principal's role in nurturing a learning community in special education is pivotal; however, few school leaders are well prepared for this responsibility (DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003). In light of the dilemmas that administrators must face daily,

those of them who utilize multiple perspectives of leadership may be better equipped to handle the ambiguity and unpredictable nature of their field. By creating and supporting relational networks that facilitate dialogue, support, and sharing between teachers, administrators, students, and families, the social capital grows as stakeholders work together for the benefit of all learners with disabilities, and are critical to the lasting success of special education efforts (Bateman and Bateman, 2001; DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003; Gersten et al., 2001).

## FURTHER EXPLORATION

It is important to apply the professional learning community framework to inquiry into specific disabilities and at different school levels (elementary, secondary). What are the organizational structures that promote collaborative learning (e.g., educational class meetings)? What are the necessary learning values (e.g., transparency) to promote productive learning? Do school practices and changes occur because of participation in these learning structures and processes? Hence, future research should scrutinize the effects of extensive collaborative learning on various outcomes, for example on teachers' level of commitment to school and their perceived collective efficacy, which were already linked with student achievements in regular education schools (Schechter, 2008). Does collaborative learning mean to be a form of deep reflective professional growth (double-loop learning) or are these learning processes simply in place to transmit low-level understandings (single-loop learning) of how we do things around here? What is the role of learning communities during change periods in special education schools (e.g., staff turnover, increase/decrease in the number of students/teachers)? Similarly, it would be interesting to study under what conditions special education schools would increase or decrease their extent of collaborative learning. For example, does perceived environmental uncertainty impact the extent of collaborative learning processes in special education schools?

## SUMMARY

The professional learning community may serve as the overarching theme providing the foundation for the various methods of support that can be utilized within special education schools. Such a community can provide a rich environment for collaborative thinking, and consequently for the development of skills and insights needed by special education teachers (Dukes and Lamar-Dukes, 2007; Yssel et al., 2002). Thus, creating special education schools as professional learning

communities may support both administrators' and faculty members' efforts to cope with the rapid changes and needs of their field. To this end, the notion of professional learning communities needs to be explicitly deliberated and empirically investigated in the context of special education schools.

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