

THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAM IN A
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAM IN A
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

by

Keith Senior, B.Sc., B. Ed.

**An internship report submitted to
the School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Education**

Faculty of Education

Memorial University

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ABSTRACT

This internship report is based on the model of a professional learning community as proposed by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker. Specifically, the roles of the principal, teachers, and parents, as outlined by Dufour and Eaker (1998), in such a learning community were compared to those observed at the internship setting.

A recollection of many of the occurrences that were part of my ten-week experience under the mentorship of the principal and assistant-principal at the internship setting are provided. Included are references to various aspects of transformational leadership and professional learning communities. Specific references are made to various meetings attended, insights into how student discipline was handled, examples of how decision-making was shared, staff professional development, and the communication of information to parents, to mention a few.

The critical reflections indicate that several characteristics present in the research were also evident at the internship setting. Thus, the provision of an argument exists for stating that the school is in the early stages of becoming a professional learning community.

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It is with much gratitude that I acknowledge the guidance of John Walsh, the principal, and Kathy Hickman, the assistant-principal, as well as the support of their staff, at the school where my internship was conducted. They treated me with kindness, respect, and collegiality.

I would also like to give special thanks to Dr. David Dibbon for his much-appreciated assistance throughout this internship experience, from the initial phone call to the principal of the school on my behalf, up to and including the completion of this report.

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERNSHIP

Rationale for Internship Option

The degree of Master of Education in Educational Leadership Studies requires the completion of a course of study that includes the theoretical basis for current educational leadership paradigms. To balance the theoretical aspect of this degree program, an internship was chosen to complete the program requirements. Such an internship provided the opportunity to work closely with a school leadership team as a means of gaining valuable insight into what constitutes effective school leadership from a practical perspective.

Having completed an internship in teaching as part of my undergraduate education degree prior to beginning my teaching career some 19 years ago, I was cognizant of the benefits that a practical internship experience could provide. With plans to hopefully acquire a leadership position at the senior high school level upon the completion of the Master of Education program, the practical internship option seemed the obvious choice in preparation for such a career move. As well, having had no previous administrative experience accentuated the value of such an internship experience when taking my career goal into consideration.

All in all, the experience gained from this administrative internship should enable me to build upon my years of experience as a classroom teacher in three different rural high schools. Also, the fact that this practicum occurred in an urban school setting, one

which differed from my past work settings, should further serve to broaden my experience as a professional educator.

The Internship Setting

The school chosen for this internship was a senior high school with a population of approximately 700 students and 40 faculty. This school was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, the principal and assistant-principal are recognized by their peers as being an exemplary leadership team that work very well together. Thus, a prospective educational leader would be well served by the mentoring of such an administrative team. When contacted they were very enthusiastic about the prospect of my working with them as a graduate intern. Secondly, this school is a senior high school. This is the student age group that I am most familiar with and enjoy working with, having spent most of my teaching career to date in such a setting. Thirdly, from an educational leadership perspective, the large size and busy pace of the school should provide many opportunities to observe and document leadership in action.

On-Site Objectives of the Internship

The primary goal while at the internship setting was for me to become part of the school leadership team as a participant/observer. More specific objectives included:

1. developing an understanding of the duties and responsibilities of both the principal and assistant principal
2. becoming an active participant in the various duties performed by both the principal and the assistant principal

3. observing the daily interaction of the administrative team in relation to each other, teachers, students, support staff, parents, district office personnel, and community groups

Activities Intended to Meet Internship Objectives

To realize the goals and objectives outlined above, the following activities were part of my internship experience. During the ten week internship I:

1. observed and participated in the preparation of and administration of the midterm examination process
2. observed and participated in student discipline policy implementation
3. participated in and helped plan for staff meetings
4. attended principals' meetings, staff meetings, department head meetings, committee meetings, parent/administration meetings, and school council meetings
5. became familiar with the teacher evaluation/supervision process used in the school/district
6. became involved in school/home/community relations, where confidentiality permitted
7. was involved in planning the schedule for parent-teacher interviews
8. helped prepare monthly attendance reports using Microsoft Excel
9. conducted student supervision and supervision of school building during class time

10. became familiar with and used the Winschool program for various school-related purposes such as tracking student attendance, academic reports, class schedules, demographics, and teacher schedules
11. observed and participated in preparations related to the student course selection process
12. updated aspects of the school profile such as enrollment projections, wall-of-honor statistics, and public exam statistics

Method of Self-Evaluation

During the internship, my main objective was to gain experience through observation and participation in the experiences indicated above. To personally evaluate my progress, and as a means of recording my experiences, I maintained a daily journal of my day-to-day activities.

On-Site Supervision

Both the principal and the assistant-principal were supervisors throughout the period of my internship at the school setting as well as during times when my experiences took me outside the school, such as when attending principals' meetings or committee meetings.

Research Component

I feel that the concept of school improvement is a very important one and one with which educators as well as educational researchers have struggled. The difficulty

has been in attempting to develop a strategy for achieving sustained, substantive school improvement. The most promising such strategy, according to Dufour and Eaker (1998), is to develop the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities. They state that their past experiences have given them insights into the practices that allow a school to operate as a professional learning community and have helped them identify the obstacles a school must overcome in the pursuit of such a goal.

The notion of a professional learning community was the focus of the research component of my internship. I studied this theory in detail and documented how the principles of a professional learning community, as proposed by Dufour and Eaker (1998), are being applied at school X. More specifically, I have briefly examined the roles of the principal, teachers, and parents as they relate to school improvement in a professional learning community.

Limitations of the Report

The main goal of this internship was to gain experience as a high school administrator by observing and participating in the duties performed by both the principal and assistant-principal. It was meant to provide opportunities for my own personal growth. Some of the information in this report may serve useful to others who have similar professional growth needs, but certainly is not generalizable to all administrative internship settings.

It should be noted that this is a report from an administrator perspective and not a teacher perspective. Any observations on teachers were obtained only through a participant/observer role as an administrator, as there was no effort made to formally

interview teachers. As well, the reader should also be cognizant of the fact that while the majority of the principles of a professional learning community, as proposed by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker, are applicable outside the United States, they are not all generalizable to Canada, especially in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Organization of the Report

This report is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the report along with information concerning the setting, supervisors, and objectives of the internship. Chapter Two deals with the concept of a school as a professional learning community in terms of the research and reflections from the internship setting of the characteristics and foundation of such a learning community. Chapters Three through Five provide an examination of the roles of the principal, teachers, and parents, respectively, in relation to the research and reflections from the internship experience and attempts to identify practices at the setting that exemplify those of a professional learning community.

CHAPTER TWO

SCHOOLS AS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Introduction

In 1990, Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* arrived in bookstores and started showing up in corporate boardrooms across America. During the next couple of years, Senge's book, describing learning organizations that might be a means of increasing organizational capacity and creativity, made its way into the field of education. Senge (1990) outlined the concept of a learning organization "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together" (p. 3). This idea caught the attention of educators who were experiencing great difficulty attempting to plan and implement school reform in the North American context. As educators researched Senge's theory of a learning organization and as it was debated in educational journals, it evolved to a concept of learning communities rather than learning organizations (Hord, 1997).

In examining the concept of a professional learning community, Hord (1997), alleges that there is no universal definition. She states "The term professional learning community defines itself. A school that operates as such engages the entire group of *professionals* in coming together for *learning* within a supportive, self-created *community*" (p. 3-4). Hord (1997) goes on to point out that, on the basis of her own extensive literature review of the subject, most educational researchers conceptualize professional learning communities as schools in which attention is given to five main

attributes: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) collective learning and application of learning, (4) supportive conditions, and (5) shared personal practice.

There is certainly much similarity between the disciplines that comprise Peter Senge's concept of a learning organization and the components of the model of a professional learning community proposed by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker. The five disciplines that form the basis of a learning organization as outlined by Senge (1990) include: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental models, (c) building teams, (d) building shared vision, and (e) systems thinking. According to Dufour and Eaker (1998), the main characteristics, or components, of a professional learning community are: (a) shared mission, vision, and values, (b) collective inquiry, (c) collaborative teams, (d) action orientation and experimentation, (e) continuous improvement, and (f) results orientation.

An examination of the major components of each model above shows some obvious similarities. For example, in the case of building shared vision in a learning organization (Senge, 1990) and shared mission, vision, and values in a professional learning community (Dufour and Eaker, 1998), both involve the idea of the members of the organization being bound together by a common aspiration. Another similarity is team building in one model (Senge, 1990) and collaborative teams in the other (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). In both cases we are concerned with the concept of people working and learning together in teams to benefit the entire organization.

All components considered, whether workers are members of a learning organization as proposed by Peter Senge or a professional learning community as proposed by Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker, they exhibit many common

characteristics. Whichever organization members belong to they are engaged in their work, striving to reach their potential, by sharing the vision of a worthy goal with team colleagues; they possess personal goals that are in alignment with the mission of the organization; they view their work as part of a whole, a system where there are interrelationships and processes that depend on each other; they take risks in order to learn; they understand how to seek enduring solutions to problems instead of quick fixes; they have a lifelong commitment to high quality work; they work collaboratively to capitalize on the synergy of continuous group learning for optimal performance; and they are well prepared for change and working with others (Senge, 1990, and Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

The purpose of the research component of this report is to examine the concept of a professional learning community as proposed by Dufour and Eaker (1998) and analyze how the school is/is not representative of this model of a professional learning community.

Characteristics and Foundation

A professional learning community, according to Dufour and Eaker (1998), requires schools to exhibit six characteristics. Such learning communities are distinguished from an ordinary school in that they are characterized by: (a) shared mission, vision, and values, (b) collective inquiry, (c) collaborative teams, (d) action orientation and experimentation, (e) continuous improvement, and (f) results orientation. In this section I will examine each of these characteristics and show, where possible, how they were part of the operating procedures in my host school.

Mission, vision, and values are very integral features of a learning community. According to Dufour and Eaker (1998) the most important part of a learning community is shared understandings and common values. They believe that it is a school's collective commitment to guiding principles, what the people in a school believe and what they seek to create, that makes a learning community different from an ordinary school. As well, they say that these guiding principles are not only followed by those in leadership positions, but are more importantly embedded in the hearts and minds of everyone in the school (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

Isaacson and Bamberg (1992) comment that sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is a particular mental image of what is important to an individual and to an organization. Staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision, but to use it as a guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning in the school.

Fullan (1993) states "Shared vision is important in the long run, but for it to be effective you have to have something to share. We should not think of vision as something for leaders. It is not a farfetched concept. It arises by pushing ourselves to articulate what is important to us as educators" (p. 13). According to Schlechty (2001), "common visions, like a common culture, create shared meaning and inspire shared commitments over time. Without a shared vision, distrust among participants is likely, and factions and factionalism are certain to grow" (p. 170).

In terms of learning organizations, Senge (1990) differentiated shared versus individual vision:

Today, 'vision' is a familiar concept in corporate leadership. But when you look carefully you find that most 'visions' are one person's (or one

group's) vision imposed on an organization. Such visions, at least, command compliance—not commitment. A shared vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to, because it reflects their own personal vision. Shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning. (p. 206)

While there was little or no mention of a shared vision at the internship school, there was evidence that the staff were together on a number of operational procedures such as the student course selection process and the process for handling student discipline. And while there was no evidence that there was a shared vision that was co-created (Senge, 1994) by the staff and the administration, there did seem to be an acceptance of the district vision – creating learner-centered school cultures. However, the concept of mission came up from time to time and the school has a current mission statement that was recently updated as part of a professional development plan that the entire staff is engaged in. The staff, along with district office personnel, shared in the revision of the mission statement to bring it more in line with the direction that the school district is headed, that of creating a school culture that is more learning-centered. It should be pointed out that while there was evidence of a shared mission, such was not the case in relation to vision and values. But, deciding or discovering one's mission is the first step in becoming a PLC so perhaps the next phase will see efforts focus on developing visions and defining values.

The second characteristic of a professional learning community, collective inquiry, is considered by Dufour and Eaker (1998) to be the “engine of improvement, growth, and renewal” (p. 25). They argue that members of a learning community will always question the status quo, look for new methods, try those methods, and reflect on the outcomes. Such people recognize that the process of seeking answers is more

important than actually having an answer, especially since the search is a collective one. Collective inquiry is also important in terms of allowing significant changes to occur in the culture of the organization (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

Collective inquiry seems to be a characteristic that can be initiated through transformational leadership by means of intellectual stimulation (Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1999). According to Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter, (1990) this type of intellectual stimulation is that which “challenges followers to re-examine some of their work and to rethink how it can be performed” (as cited in Leithwood et al. 1999, p. 75). Leithwood et al (1999) advocates that leadership initiatives that bring about intellectual stimulation may take many forms. Such initiatives could be quite informal and modest in that a teacher may simply be questioned as to why they continue to use a routine that has become an unthinking, but not very useful, part of their methodology. A somewhat more extensive but still informal initiative would be attempting to persuade a teacher that they have the support or capacity to take on new professional challenges, such as leading a school team, mentoring a beginning teacher or providing some professional development to colleagues. An initiative that would involve a more formal and extensive example of intellectual stimulation would be involving staff in the planning and implementation of a long-term professional development program that is in line with the school improvement plan (Leithwood et al, 1999).

There was some evidence of collective inquiry occurring at the internship school in that there was a school development team in place consisting of the administration and several lead teachers including department heads, one of whom was the team leader. While there were only a couple of meetings between the team leader and the

administration during the internship period, due to other school matters such as the course selection process taking priority, there were no meetings of the entire development team. A great deal of collective inquiry took place as the administration along with the department heads and guidance counselor prepared for and presented information sessions related to the student course selection process. It should be noted that the school development team does plan to be much more active in the coming school year.

According to Dufour and Eaker (1998) the third attribute of a professional learning community is collaborative teams. The collaborative teams comprise the basic structure and helps to build a school's capacity to learn. They contend that a group of collaborative teams that share a common purpose allow the people engaged to learn from one another and thereby create the momentum that may fuel continued improvement. Fullan (1993) identifies the importance of collaborative teams:

The ability to collaborate—on both a large and small scale—is one of the core requisites of post modern society....in short, without collaborative skills and relationships it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you need in order to be an agent for social improvement. (p. 17-18)

Stoll and Fink (1996) state learning organizations that invite others to become professionally involved, promote collaboration for improvement. They go on to state that “the key to collaboration within a learning organization is to promote norms of both collaboration and continuous improvement while respecting the individuality of pupils and teachers” (p. 151). On the topic of collaborative teams, Senge (1990) considers the team to be a key learning unit in the learning organization. According to Senge (1990), the definition of team learning is:

The process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. It builds on the discipline of developing

shared vision. It also builds on personal mastery, for talented teams are made up of talented individuals. (p. 236)

Examples of collaboration of staff members existed at the internship setting. The principal and assistant-principal collaborated quite often as an administrative team. Department heads at the school collaborated with the administration and each department head was involved in collaboration among the staff within their respective departments. There was also strong collaboration between the members of staff in monitoring the programs and progress of challenging needs students. Specific examples of collaborative teams will be presented in subsequent chapters of this report.

Action orientation and experimentation, the fourth characteristic of a professional learning community as identified by Dufour and Eaker (1998), refers to the idea that, not only do members of this type of community act on their aspirations, they are not willing to put up with inaction. There is a willingness to experiment regardless of what the outcome may be, for even if the result is not what they expected they do not look upon it as a failure but rather they view it as just part of the learning process (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

When it comes to learning by trying something new or risk taking, Stoll and Fink (1996) state "Experimentation, trial and error and learning through failure are essential parts of growing. There is always an element of uncertainty when trying out a new practice or strategy, and a distinct possibility that it will not work" (p. 95). They further state that "The principal can play a role by encouraging and modeling risk taking" (p. 95).

Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) argue that one guideline for 'interactive professionalism' to help create, sustain, and motivate teachers throughout their careers is for them to "develop a risk-taking mentality—change and improvement are accompanied by anxiety, uncertainty and stress, particularly in early stages of doing something new. The risk can be reduced by trying out a new practice on a small scale" (p.110).

The administration at the internship setting was certainly open to trying new things. Two such examples involved the department heads at the school. One was the plan to involve them in the hiring of staff to fill vacancies in the different departments and the other was having them play a role in the presentation of information to parents and students related to the course selection process.

The fifth attribute and the one that exemplifies the heart of a professional learning community is that its members are uncomfortable with simply maintaining the status quo and thus there is always a search for continuous improvement, a better way of doing things. (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). They suggest that in order for there to be continuous improvement, each member must be constantly considering several key questions:

1. What is our fundamental purpose?
2. What do we hope to achieve?
3. What are our strategies for becoming better?
4. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts?

Stoll and Fink (1996), in examining the concept of continuous improvement as it relates to successful school improvement, speak about the people involved needing to look at how they relate to and value each other. They state that these people need to have

the attitude that “no matter how effective the school is deemed to be, there is an assumption that more can always be achieved” (p. 94).

This conception of not being satisfied with the status quo and thus constantly seeking improvement was also exemplified at the internship setting. Again it goes back to the reference to the school development team that was in place there. The purpose of this team was to examine the present situation and then develop and implement a change process that would result in ongoing improvement in terms of student achievement.

The final characteristic, as identified by Dufour and Eaker (1998), encompasses the others previously mentioned in that its efforts to achieve the other five characteristics needs to be evaluated on the basis of actual results and not on intentions. Since the main purpose behind developing a professional learning community is to improve results, all results need to be constantly assessed. Senge (1996) comments that “the rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (p. 44).

Eaker, Dufour, and Dufour (2002), in relation to results-oriented school cultures, state:

More traditional schools tend to make decisions based primarily on how well teachers “like” particular approaches. A professional learning community recognizes that feelings are important, but makes the primary basis for embedding particular practices into the school culture the effect that these practices have on student learning. This emphasis on how practices affect student learning helps to create a results-oriented culture. (p. 21)

The concept of results-orientation was not manifested at the internship setting. The principal did have good intentions in terms of student achievement results, as was evident from the amount of stress that he placed on student achievement indicators such

as student progress reports each term, provincial public examination results, and the level of success in terms of students receiving various scholarships. He was also very concerned with the notion of students' time on task and attempting to ensure that disruptions to class instruction time were kept to a minimum. However, when it came to actions being taken at the school based on actual achievement results, there was no evidence of such action.

In conclusion, the school where I completed my internship did partially meet some of the criteria of a professional learning community such as having a shared mission, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and experimentation, and, to a certain extent, continuous improvement. However, if they are to seriously consider the model of a PLC as a school improvement initiative, they will need to focus greater attention on creating a shared vision, defining their values, identifying their goals, and adopting an orientation that focuses on improving results.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN A PLC

Dufour and Eaker (1998) contend that in order for school principals (and in some cases assistant principals) to have the greatest possible impact, in terms of school improvement, they must view their job as helping to create a professional learning community in which teachers are provided the opportunity to collaborate and learn how to become more effective. "Principals must recognize that this task demands less command and control and more learning and leading, less dictating and more orchestrating" (p. 184).

Leithwood et al (1999) propose a model of transformational leadership in schools that conceptualizes such leadership along seven dimensions: building school vision; establishing school goals; providing intellectual stimulation; offering individualized support; modeling best practices and important organizational values; demonstrating high performance expectations; creating a productive school culture; and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions. The similarities between these dimensions of transformational leadership and the characteristics that would be exhibited by principals as leaders in a professional learning community proposed by Dufour and Eaker (1998), an examination of which will follow, point to transformational leadership as a desirable type of leadership for a school to function as a learning community.

In their leadership roles in professional learning communities, principals exhibit the following characteristics, according to Dufour and Eaker (1998):

1. They lead through shared vision and values rather than through rules and procedures. The principal involves the faculty in the co-creation of shared

vision and values and then relies on such vision and values to give the people the direction needed for them to act autonomously. This responsibility, regarding the identification, promotion, and protection of shared vision and values, is looked upon by these principals as one of their most important responsibilities. (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). Leithwood et al (1999) would refer to this characteristic as the transformational leadership dimension of building vision. Sergiovanni (1994) states "The sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas" (p. 214).

The administration at the internship setting appeared to lead more through rules and procedures than through developing a shared vision and values. Since there was no evidence during my ten weeks at the school of any shared development of rules and procedures, it would seem that those rules and procedures followed at the school may have been developed and put in place by the administration without a lot of input from the staff. If this is indeed the case, hopefully this will change with a more active school development team now in place.

2. They involve faculty members in the school's decision-making processes and empower individuals to act. A conscious effort is made to promote widespread participation in the decision-making of their schools because they realize that the school's problem-solving cannot be accomplished alone due to the fact that the challenge of leading a school is too complex and that information is too widely distributed. As well, these principals realize that unless staff members feel a sense of ownership in the decisions that affect them, any

change initiatives will likely not succeed. (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). As Covey (1989) states “Without involvement, there is no commitment. Mark it down, asterisk it, circle it, underline it. No involvement, no commitment” (p. 143). Transformational leaders would develop structures to foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood et al, 1999).

There was evidence at the internship setting that decision-making was not only shared by the principal and assistant-principal but also involved the teaching staff as well as parents to a certain extent. There were several examples of faculty involvement in decision-making, including the case of student discipline. While the administration encouraged staff to deal with their own student discipline issues, they were certainly supported in their efforts by the administration. In the case where a student was removed from class and sent to the office because of inappropriate behavior, how that student was dealt with by the administration depended upon the perceived severity of the incident. It should also be noted that student discipline was another responsibility shared equally by both administrators. In most cases, the disruptive student was interviewed by the principal or assistant-principal, depending on which one was available, and then the teacher would be consulted regarding the incident. The teacher would be asked by the administrator involved to give their opinion as to how they would like to see the incident dealt with. In most cases the appropriate disciplinary action was collaboratively determined by the teacher and the administrator.

Another example of shared decision-making was evident at a department head meeting in which the principal made a commitment to allow the department heads more input into hiring decisions made at the school. He said that he would like to see the department heads involved in the interviewing process for new staff members and that they have some say in terms of which candidate is eventually selected to fill a position in their particular department.

The school department heads were also given input for the first time at the school this year in terms of the information that would be provided to parents to help them, along with their children, to make informed choices concerning course selections for the upcoming school year. A meeting was held between the principal, assistant-principal, and each department head to discuss the information that would be relevant to students and their parents/guardians when choosing courses. The end result was that during the course selection information sessions that were provided to the teachers, students, and parents of the feeder school and the present level I and II students and parents of this school, each department head provided a brief presentation pertaining to course information in their particular subject area. Thus, the information sessions became a collaborative effort of the administration, department heads, and the school guidance counselor. Collaboration is another important characteristic of a school that functions as a professional learning community.

Collaboration and shared decision-making involving parents was also evident at the school along the lines of their involvement in different committees, some of which were for the purpose of planning and carrying out

certain school events such as the Safe Graduation activities that followed the Senior Prom. Other parents served on committees of the school council. The principal, assistant-principal, as well as many faculty members, were very active in soliciting parents to be involved at the school level. A more in-depth look at parent involvement will come later when reflections on the role of parents at the internship setting are examined.

3. They provide staff with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions. Staff members are provided with relevant background information and research findings that allow them to form opinions that are informed. As well, principals of professional learning communities make certain that teachers get the training necessary to master skills that aid them to more effectively achieve the school's goals. They also provide time and put structures in place to allow for staff reflection and discussion (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). This is similar to the dimension of transformational leadership proposed by Leithwood et al. (1999) that involves the leader providing intellectual stimulation to the members of the organization.

At the internship setting, the staff members, as part of their ongoing professional development, were required to develop written individual professional growth plans containing both short-term and long-term professional development goals. These plans were then discussed and reviewed with the administration on an individual basis. Due to the personal nature of these teacher-administrator meetings I was unable to be in attendance and thus am unable to comment on the types of specific

professional development goals the teaching staff were involved in. However, I am aware that within the concept of such professional growth plans teachers are encouraged by the school administration, as well as district office, to seek training opportunities in their individual areas of interest.

In terms of providing faculty members with relevant educational research findings, it was common practice for the principal and assistant-principal to provide current research articles for staff to examine and then discuss in subsequent staff meetings. From this it could be seen that the administration of the school was concerned with encouraging staff to take time to become familiar with current educational research that could possibly be used to help them achieve school improvement goals.

4. They establish credibility by modeling behavior that is congruent with the vision and values of the school. That is, such principals act in ways that set a good example for the rest of the staff in that their actions are consistent with the vision and values of the school. This lends credibility to the principal as a leader and builds a sense of trust among the staff (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). Modeling best practices and important organizational values is one of the dimensions of transformational leadership (Leithwood et al, 1999). After over two decades of asking people what they want in a leader, Kouzes and Posner (1996) concluded:

We want leaders who are credible. We must be able to believe in them. We must believe their word can be trusted, that they are personally excited and enthusiastic about the direction in which we are headed, and that they have the knowledge and skill to lead. We call it the first law of leadership: "If you don't believe in the messenger you won't believe the message." (p. 103)

The administration at the internship school did not establish its credibility by modeling behavior consistent with the shared vision and values of the school since there was no evidence that such vision and values were clearly stated. However, the principal and assistant-principal did establish credibility with their staff by acting in a consistently professional manner that allowed them to build a sense of trust and respect among the faculty and support staff.

5. They are results-oriented. Schools need principals who are fixated on results in order to develop the results orientation of a learning community. Thus, principals of successful learning communities work with their staffs to present clear and measurable goals, to recognize indicators that provide evidence of progress, and to develop systems for continuously monitoring those indicators. They are always looking for data that is meaningful and all results are critically analyzed. Schools will only become results-oriented and show a commitment to continuous improvement if principals use the evidence they accumulate to inform practice, celebrate success, and identify areas that need further attention (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). This is characteristic of transformational leaders when they demonstrate high performance expectations (Leithwood et al, 1999).

In relation to the concept of results orientation, Schlechty (1990) states:

The results by which school systems must be led are the results that are consistent with the purpose of school, as that purpose is articulated in the school's vision statement and belief structure. In schools as knowledge-work enterprises, the school's business is to ensure that each child, each day, is successfully engaged in working on and with knowledge and knowledge-related products.

The results by which schools should be led, therefore, are results that are clear indicators of student success. (pp. 141-142)

The principal at my internship school certainly had an orientation toward results. Whether these results were from first term report cards, midterm examinations, final in-school examinations, or provincial public examinations, he was very concerned with students' academic achievement. There is a wall-of-honor at the school on which the names of students who achieved first-class or second-class honors on the latest report card are posted for all the school to see.

The principal's concern regarding student achievement was also quite evident in other ways. For instance, with a number of the teachers on staff, especially the department heads, involved in educational pursuits outside the school such as serving on school board committees and provincial department of education committees, the principal is very concerned about lost instruction time by these lead teachers. He gave me a copy of a memo he had sent in reply to another request to have one of the teachers participate in an education-related event that would require them to acquire a substitute. His response stated that while it was a positive experience for these teachers to be involved in out-of-school professional activities, his priority had to be the academic well-being of the students and that this would have to be the last such absence he could approve.

There was also constant concern over lost instructional time due to in-school class disruptions. While such disruptions were intentionally kept to a minimum by such policies as only having announcements made during homeroom in the morning and again during the last two or three minutes of the last class period of the day, the concern always seemed to be present. There was usually at

least some reference to making good use of instructional time in every Monday newsletter sent to the staff by the principal.

Dufour and Eaker (1998) state “principals cannot transform a school through their individual efforts. Creating a professional learning community is a collaborative effort, but that effort has little chance of success without effective leadership from the principal” (p. 203). Elmore (2000), in commenting on the role of administrative leaders, argues that:

The job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (p. 15)

In terms of the principal’s role in bringing about change in schools, Schlechty (1990) states “Those who would lead change in schools must be especially attentive to designing the changes and their implementation in ways that foster collegiality” (p. 92). He goes on to argue that “Too often changes are introduced in a way that fosters competition and rivalry among teachers, rather than encouraging collegial support” (p. 92). It would seem that the principal’s role in a professional learning community involves being a transformational-type leader, very similar to the type proposed by Leithwood et al. (1999). Fullan (2001) states “students in schools led by principals who foster strong professional communities are much more likely to encounter three good teachers in a row, whether it be on the same day or over the years” (p. 150).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN A PLC

While the principal is a critical player in leading the movement towards a professional learning community, it will not happen without a commitment from the teaching staff. A principal can initiate the movement but it is the classroom teachers who will have to implement the processes and procedures if the notion of a professional learning community is to be institutionalized.

In describing the role of teachers in a successful school, Boyer (1995) stated:

Community begins with a shared vision. It's sustained by teachers who, as school leaders, bring inspiration and direction to the institution. Who, after all, knows more about the classroom? Who is better able to inspire children? Who can evaluate, more sensitively, the educational progress of each student? And who but teachers create a true community of learning? Teachers are, without question, the heartbeat of a successful school. (p. 31).

The success of any attempt to create a professional learning community will ultimately be determined by the level of competence and commitment exhibited by the professionals in that school, particularly its teachers. Schools are effective, not in spite of its teachers but because of them. Even the best plan for school improvement will fail if teachers are lacking the skills required for implementation. To be successful, teachers must be knowledgeable concerning the principles of a learning community and be able to bring these principles to life in their own classrooms. "Situated in the classroom—the critical focal point of the learning community—teachers are essential to any meaningful reform effort and are in the best position to have a positive impact on the lives of children" (Dufour and Eaker, 1998, p. 206).

Although the emphasis during my internship was on the roles and responsibilities

of the administrative team at the school, the role of the teacher in the classroom working with the students is certainly a very crucial one especially when looking at the concept of a professional learning community. Most of my time at the internship setting was spent shadowing the principal and assistant-principal in an attempt to become familiar with how they performed the duties demanded of them in their leadership positions. This did not leave a lot of time to attempt to observe the actions of the teaching staff as they went about their daily routines. However, there was strong evidence of collaboration among certain teachers, especially among those in the mathematics department. It should be noted here that I was somewhat more aware of what was taking place among the mathematics teachers of the school than among other groups of teachers because of my personal interest in the mathematics area. Having been a high school math teacher for nineteen years, but more so because of the implementation of a new senior high mathematics program in the province, I was quite interested in finding out how the implementation process was going at the school. I recall browsing through the teacher timetables in order to identify those teaching mathematics at the school.

Maybe it was the stress of attempting to implement a new mathematics program that caused the mathematics teachers to depend on each other for help or maybe collaboration among colleagues was simply common practice throughout the school, but whatever the reason it seems that the mathematics teachers all worked in close consultation with each other. Those teaching the same courses checked to see that they were moving through the course objectives at the same pace, gave their students common assignments, gave exams based on the same format, took turns preparing or collectively prepared unit tests, and administered common midterm examinations which they

prepared collaboratively. Such collaboration should occur among all groups of colleagues if a school is to function as a professional learning community.

If teachers are to contribute to the transformation of their schools into professional learning communities, they must be cognizant of their need to be professionals and continue to “practice” and explore the art and science of teaching throughout their careers. While there was evidence of collaboration in this department, a PLC involves much more than collaboration. For example, according to Dufour and Eaker (1998), in PLCs:

1. Professional teachers routinely collaborate with their colleagues. The existence of a collaborative culture is a very important aspect of a PLC. While traditional teachers work away in isolation, professional teachers share ideas about their practice.
2. Professional teachers emphasize active student engagement with significant content. They discern the importance of action when students learn since most of what they learn stems from what they do. However, the challenge is not to simply ensure that students are engaged in tasks, as students have always been assigned tasks by teachers, but rather to involve students in the probing of content in real and meaningful ways that permits them to become proficient at a higher level.
3. Professional teachers focus on student performance and production. While traditional teachers develop their lesson plans with a focus on their own activities in the classroom, teachers in a PLC develop their plans based on what it is their students will be doing in the classroom. They emphasize pupil

performance and production in the context of the real world (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). Newman et al (1996) state that in schools that function as professional learning communities, students are asked to do the work of scientists, musicians, business entrepreneurs, politicians, mathematicians, attorneys, novelists, physicians, designers, historians, critics, etceteras.

4. Professional teachers emphasize learning rather than teaching. Teachers in a PLC go beyond the simple presentation and coverage of material. They recognize that teaching has not taken place until learning has taken place and that learning must be both measurable and measured. Such teachers emphasize involving students in the examination of fundamental content in ways that will help them acquire an in-depth understanding of that content rather than simply covering the required material.
5. Professional teachers are students of teaching and consumers of research. Regardless of their field, professionals are expected to remain current in terms of learning about new concepts of “best practice.” However, this does not mean that they should stop using their professional judgment and try every new theory that pops up. New ideas warrant consideration, experimentation, debate, and assessment before becoming a part of everyday practice. Schools that operate as professional learning communities put systems in place that allow for the examination of research findings either by the entire staff or by groups of teachers (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).
6. Professional teachers function as leaders. Eaker et al. (2002) states:

One of the most fundamental cultural shifts that takes place as schools become professional learning communities involves how teachers are

viewed. In traditional schools, administrators are viewed as being in leadership positions, while teachers are viewed as “implementers” or followers. In professional learning communities, administrators are viewed as leaders of leaders. Teachers are viewed as transformational leaders. (p. 22)

The task of a teacher is similar to that of any leader. Like leaders in any field, effective teachers know that they will not be able to perform the other tasks involved in leadership without clearly understanding what they want to achieve. They possess a good sense of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that they wish students to exhibit in their classes, and they are able to mentally rehearse methods to achieve the desired outcomes (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

Teachers, as leaders, are effective communicators. They monitor student achievement and respond when students experience difficulty. They celebrate when students do well and confront those who are not giving their best effort. Such teacher leaders are cognizant of the power of example and thus they model the passion and enthusiasm for learning that they want their students to show. As well, effective teachers, like great leaders, are willing to accept responsibility for their students because they feel that they are in a position to affect learning (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). Despite new analogies for the role of a teacher, such as the teacher as diagnostician, parent, social worker, entertainer, and so on, Dufour and Eaker (1998) argue “the only appropriate analogy for teacher is the teacher as leader” (p. 229).

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN A PLC

Parents often become involved in the school system when their child starts kindergarten and usually have a genuine interest in pursuing a positive home-school relationship. They are concerned about their child's learning and take an active role in school (Peel & Foster, 1993). "The excitement and novelty of having children start school often are enough incentive for parents of elementary age children to stay actively involved during these early years" (Peel & Foster, 1993, p. 2). As their children move into junior and senior high, this involvement changes and parents are less likely to be caught up with the everyday activities of the school (Chavkin & Williams, 1989).

In examining the role of parents in a professional learning community, Dufour and Eaker (1998) have identified six standards for parental involvement. These standards include:

1. Regular, two-way, and timely communication between the home and school.
"Research indicates that when parents receive frequent and effective communication from their children's school, their involvement increases, their overall evaluation of educators is more favorable, and their attitudes toward the school and its program improves (National PTA, as cited in DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 241).
2. Parenting skills are promoted and supported. For example, developing strategies that help families build home environments that support their children.

3. Focus on student learning. Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning. The school needs to provide families with information and ideas about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum related activities (Epstein et al., 1997).
4. Volunteering. Parents need to be welcome in the school, but the school must first identify where volunteer services are required.
5. Decision making. DuFour and Eaker (1998) state “Parents are more likely to feel ownership in a school and its programs when they have a voice in key decisions” (p. 249).
6. Collaboration with the community. For example, McCaleb (1994) comments that education takes place within the community context. In that regard “the community is invited and welcomed into the school as a valuable resource for knowledge, and as a resource to be worked with, studied, discussed, and understood” (p. 42).

Reflecting on my internship experiences in terms of parental involvement and the idea of parents as partners at the school, while there was evidence of such involvement, the concern at the senior high level seems to be the somewhat small numbers of parents actually taking an active role in the process of educating students. As was outlined in the research component of this chapter, the numbers of parents actively involved with their children’s school tends to decrease as the children move into junior and senior high. The low turn out of parents at parent-teacher conferences that were held at the school was evidence of this trend.

In terms of the six standards for parental involvement that are part of the model of a professional learning community as outlined by Dufour and Eaker (1998), some aspects of such standards were evident at the internship setting. Communication between the school and parents is very important for building and maintaining a good working relationship and ensuring that parents remain informed about what is happening at the school. Several means of two-way communication between the school and parents existed including the use of e-mail, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences, parent information meetings, a meet-the-teacher night, and school council meetings. In addition, as a way of keeping parents informed about school events and concerns, as well as achievements, there was a school web site, newsletters and memos sent home with students, school reports on the various local radio stations, and sometimes the mailing of letters.

One of the projects I took on while at the school was to identify chronic late students. Late students are tracked daily at the school by requiring them to obtain a late slip for homeroom in the morning and afternoon from teachers who perform late slip duty in the corridors. Every two weeks the late slip data is compiled by homeroom and students are given after-school detentions based on the number of "lates" they have accumulated. Three "lates" in a two-week period resulted in one after-school detention. Chronic late students were identified as those having accumulated two or more detentions to date during the school year. A letter was drafted and mailed home to the parents of these students informing them of the school's concern and the reasons for the concern. The intention was that this would prompt the parents/guardians to take ownership of the problem and work with the school to see a favorable resolution to the problem.

Along the lines of parenting and having parenting skills promoted and supported by the school, I was not made aware of any such efforts at the internship setting. This concept is, however, closely related to the standard identified by Dufour and Eaker (1998) known as student learning. It involves parents playing an integral role in assisting student learning at home by having the school provide families with information and ideas about how to help with homework and other curriculum related activities. At the internship setting students were provided with student handbooks that not only contained a great deal of information about the school in terms of programs, facilities, student guidelines, awards, and various policies, but also included a section for the student concerning such things as setting academic goals, time management, study strategies, career preparation, and general resources. The handbook could also be used to keep track of assigned homework, as well as assignment due dates, and upcoming exams. It could certainly be used as a valuable source of information to parents as a method of tracking and assisting with their children's schoolwork.

In terms of volunteering, there was little, if any, evidence of parents being present in the school during regular school hours to provide voluntary assistance to staff or students. A few parents were involved in ticket sales for different fundraisers during lunch period, but most parent volunteering involved committee work such as serving on school council committees or the "safe grad" committee. It seems that only a small percentage of parents were actually involved on a voluntary basis at the school level.

Shared decision-making is a very important aspect of any school that functions as a professional learning community. For parents to feel that they are valued and welcome participants in the school improvement process, they, like the other members of a

learning community, must play a role in decision-making at the school level. This opportunity for involvement in the decision-making process is provided to parents through the existence of a very active school council at the internship setting. Parent representatives are elected to the council and other parents are permitted to volunteer to serve as members on the various council committees.

I attended three monthly meetings as well as an emergency meeting of the school council during my internship experience, which provided me the opportunity to witness first-hand the workings of a very active school council. There was a lot of information regarding the school shared at these meetings through the means of reports provided by the principal, the student representative, and the different committee chairs. An action plan was in place to guide the work of the council and this was referred to at each meeting to ensure that the objectives outlined in the plan were successfully being achieved.

The last standard of parental involvement, mentioned in the research component of this chapter, was that of collaborating with the community. This concept involves the use of community resources to strengthen schools, family, and student learning. The principal of the school is a very active and well-known member of the community as he is a member of both the city council and the local parish council. As such he has many contacts with businesses and other agencies in the community. This is certainly advantageous to a school with ever increasing financial need and decreasing resources. The principal has been very successful at securing funding from different partnerships in the community as a means of providing much needed resources to enhance quality

programs at the school which serve to benefit the students, their families, and the school community as a whole.

Based on my personal reflections it appears that there are certainly some positive things happening at this school in terms of parental and community involvement, but there still remains much room for an improved parent-school partnership, such as would exist in a fully functioning professional learning community.

In stepping towards school improvement, if we want to improve student performance and achievement, as well as behavior and attitudes towards school, parents must be encouraged to participate. School administrators and teachers must become open-minded, be willing to involve parents in decision-making and implementation of practices, and be willing to accept their suggestions (Hornby, 2000). Many education jurisdictions are moving to collaborative models, such as school councils, where all groups affected by educational decisions participate appropriately in making them. This change recognizes that together, educators, parents, students, and the community can bring an increase in public advocacy and improvement to education.

Conclusion

A school that functions as a professional learning community exhibits certain characteristics and is built on a solid foundation of shared mission, vision, values, and goals. These characteristics include shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

In examining the roles of the principal, teachers, and parents in a PLC, it has become quite evident that the involvement of all of these partners in education is crucial if a school is to operate as a successful learning community. While creating a PLC has to be a collective effort, there is not much chance of that effort resulting in success unless there is effective leadership from the principal. Effective principals are those who: (a) lead through shared vision and values rather than through rules and procedures, (b) involve faculty members in the school's decision-making processes and empower individuals to act, (c) provide staff with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions, (d) establish credibility by modeling behavior that is congruent with the vision and values of the school, and (e) are results-oriented (Dufour and Eaker, 1998).

The potential exists for Newfoundland and Labrador schools to become professional learning communities, but there needs to be a commitment to the process. The process includes a well-thought-out and developed plan to consciously integrate the components of a PLC into the school community. For that to occur the various partners in education must come together and work collaboratively to achieve such a goal. The most critical requirement in transforming schools into functioning professional learning

communities are school principals that possess transformational leadership skills, faculty that possess the characteristics of professional teachers, and parents that are given the opportunity to be contributing members of the school community. Of course in the Newfoundland context this must happen within the confines of a supportive district office.

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