

**A View of Professional Learning Communities Through Three  
Frames: Leadership, organization, and culture**  
**Un regard sur les communautés d'apprentissages  
professionnelles à travers trois cadres contextuels : le  
leadership, l'organisation et la culture**

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Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2010

Mentoring: Promoting learning in collaborative communities  
Mentorat : promouvoir l'apprentissage au sein de communautés  
collaboratives

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/045603ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/045603ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

0024-9033 (print)  
1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mullen, C. A. & Schunk, D. H. (2010). A View of Professional Learning  
Communities Through Three Frames: Leadership, organization, and culture.  
*McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 45(2),  
185–203. <https://doi.org/10.7202/045603ar>

Article abstract

In this discussion of professional learning communities (PLCs) in North American public schools, we examine three theoretical frames – leadership, organization, and culture. Issues related to learning are infused throughout our presentation of the frames. Based on our analysis of the current literature on this topic, PLCs offer a promising tool for system-wide change and collaborative mentorship in public schools. Implications for collaborative mentorship within PLCs are uncovered in relation to the professional learning of teachers and leaders and their community development. We dovetail the literature on learning, learning communities, and mentoring in order to identify such expanded possibilities for school teams that are supported by practical examples of change.

# A VIEW OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THREE FRAMES: LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATION, AND CULTURE

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**ABSTRACT.** In this discussion of professional learning communities (PLCs) in North American public schools, we examine three theoretical frames – leadership, organization, and culture. Issues related to learning are infused throughout our presentation of the frames. Based on our analysis of the current literature on this topic, PLCs offer a promising tool for system-wide change and collaborative mentorship in public schools. Implications for collaborative mentorship within PLCs are uncovered in relation to the professional learning of teachers and leaders and their community development. We dovetail the literature on learning, learning communities, and mentoring in order to identify such expanded possibilities for school teams that are supported by practical examples of change.

**UN REGARD SUR LES COMMUNAUTÉS D'APPRENTISSAGES PROFESSIONNELLES À TRAVERS TROIS CADRES CONTEXTUELS : LE LEADERSHIP, L'ORGANISATION ET LA CULTURE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Au sein de cette discussion sur les communautés d'apprentissages professionnelles (CAPs) dans les écoles publiques nord-américaines, nous faisons l'examen du phénomène via trois cadres théoriques – le leadership, l'organisation et la culture. Les problématiques liées à l'apprentissage sont également introduites à travers les mêmes cadres. Suite à notre analyse de la littérature courante sur le sujet, les CAPs semblent un outil prometteur pour faciliter des changements systémiques étendus et des initiatives de mentorats collaboratifs dans les écoles publiques. Les tenants et aboutissants du mentorat collaboratifs sont dévoilés en mettant en évidence leurs liens avec les apprentissages professionnels des enseignants et des leaders en regard du développement de leur communauté. Ce faisant, nous combinons la littérature sur l'apprentissage, les communautés d'apprentissages et le mentorat afin d'identifier de nouvelles possibilités pour les équipes-écoles qui sont appuyées par des expériences pratiques de changement.

In this article we describe the professional learning community (PLC) concept through theoretical frames that are relevant to North American public schools. Our synthesis of the educational literature indicates that the PLC concept has been examined from leadership, organizational, and cultural frames, with an emergent focus on learning. The concept of frame is used interchangeably

herein with “perspective” and “theme.” We define *frame* as a lens for identifying possibilities for school teams that underscore more expansive purposes, functions, and activities (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996). Power and leadership dynamics, implicit in frames, are social, mediated, and relationship-oriented (Hoffman-Kipp, 2003; Stewart, 2006). We view PLCs and the place of mentoring within them as significant topics in terms of both theory and application of principles and practices in schools geared toward improved student performance assessed with standardized tests. In our discussion of the three frames, we address the dynamic role of collaborative mentoring within learning organizations. As university leaders (a department chair and dean in education) responsible for initiating and implementing different types of university-school partnerships, we are invested in understanding innovative and functional conceptualizations of learning communities that respond to the changing conditions of public schools.

#### META-VIEW OF THE PLC LITERATURE

Spreading from one school building to another, penetrating borders and rebuilding school cultures, the learning community is “currently in vogue” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). In fact, the PLC initiative may have become an educational movement propelled by entrepreneurial experimentation with school-wide improvement (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Faculty collaboration, student learning, and organizational performance are being sparked at an entirely new level through such processes as shared leadership, stakeholder buy-in, and synergy.

The *professional learning community* places “quality teaching” at the center of adult learning within schools in order to impact student learning (Hord, Rousin, & Sommers, 2010). Moreover, the PLC is a model of school organization designed to foster collaboration and continuous learning among educators to harness school improvement through organizational and cultural change. In fact, school improvement is only possible through school communities that serve as a vehicle for across-the-board, whole-school learning (Matthews, Crow, & Matthews, 2009; Murphy & Lick, 2005). This type of community depends on a collaborative effort among teachers, leaders, and others to guide decisions that support student and teacher learning through such goals as school improvement, professional development, and accountability (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2008; Johnson, 2009; Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2006; Mullen & Hutinger, 2008; Mullen, 2009; Sudeck, Doolittle, & Rattigan, 2009).

Members of PLCs are school personnel who foster organizational knowledge by working collaboratively as action researchers in a variety of ways that may differ from one school to the next and that may include one or more groups or the entire staff (Leithwood et al., 2006). Situated as team players, educators and other school personnel commit to achieving better results for stu-

dents and improving their schools through their job-embedded, instructional learning and mentoring of one another (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 269; see also Donahoo & Hunter, 2007; DuFour, 2004; Mullen, 2009). Within PLC schools, two distinct concepts – professional learning and community – are integrated. Given the typical isolation of public school personnel, this integration is counter-cultural. Where organizational learning is evident across schools and monitored from within, PLCs have been identified as “smart” cultures (Leithwood et al., 2006).

Generally, certain principles and values inform the work of PLC members for whom leadership, organization, culture, and learning are all central components of change. The most salient of these principles and actions are as follows: a common impetus for change; a shared vision and common goals regarding the need for universal design in the school; the belief that all members of the school team are equal and that increased collaborative planning among staff can support the needs of all learners; encouragement of risk taking and the sharing of ideas; recognition that professional inquiry is crucial and that teaching strategies should be research-supported; and attention on planning for assessment that is reflected in school-wide action (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2005; The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

The PLC initiative did not spread as a result of the grassroots experimentation of a school or district. Rather, it grew out of widespread and multifarious policies and implementations that reinforced this message. DuFour et al. (2005) detail the impact of influential educational organizations (e.g., the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals) serving as the backbone and catalyst of this initiative. Such associations have endorsed the belief that teachers who work in communities change their environments for the better. School teams have been called upon to work together to improve student learning through policy, instruction, and staff development.

*Mentoring* refers to the development of knowledge and transference of skills by professionals or students within such teaching and learning contexts as PLCs (Allen & Eby, 2007; Mullen, 2009). However, we express value for *collaborative mentoring*, which is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth and development of all partners (Mullen, 2005). This learning partnership goes beyond assisting and coaching; it brings together seasoned and novice educators, or teachers and students, to creatively problem solve and invest time in learning, leading to such outcomes as enhanced morale and emotions and increased self-efficacy and productivity (Schunk, 2008). Within the context of the PLC, a premium is placed on continual learning. Hence, it is essential that members share their points of view, seek to learn, and collaboratively promote desirable results in student achievement through consensus building. PLCs that support collaborative approaches to mentoring through faculty study groups

and other avenues are considered the cornerstone of shared vision and school reform (Moyer, Dockery, Jamieson, & Ross, 2006).

### THE PLC CONCEPT THROUGH THREE FRAMES

We next present our thematic results from the literature. The categorization of the three frames is somewhat artificial because they overlap and inform each other. We dovetail the research on learning, learning communities, and mentoring in order to tease out some possibilities for new and more progressive forms of engagement in public schools.

#### *Frame 1: Leadership and the learning community*

Three types of leadership are salient within the leadership literature – instructional, transformational, and transactional. Positive attribution is ascribed to the first two for the emphasis they give to improving teaching and learning in schools (e.g., Stewart, 2006). What distinguishes these models from the transactional model is the focus of administrators and teachers on the improvement of teaching and learning. Instructional leaders focus on school goals, the curriculum, instruction, and the school environment. Transformational leaders restructure the school environment by improving working conditions.

However, the idea that “good” leaders demonstrate all three types of leadership at different times and for different purposes is fundamental within leadership discourses and essential to enacting collaborative mentorship. Transactional leadership is common; it places emphasis on setting clear goals, aligning goals with actions (e.g., prioritizing the needs of teachers to focus on student learning above competing school needs), and using rewards and/or punishments to achieve stated objectives. For example, a teacher might receive a financial bonus for leading a PLC initiative, such as whole-school study groups (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008).

PLC leaders encourage shared governance, teacher leadership, and the collaboration of school staff (Hord et al., 2010; Murphy & Lick, 2005). PLCs enable collegial decision-making and power-sharing between administrators and teachers, veteran and new teachers alike (Mullen, 2009). Teacher leaders generate the conditions for turning schools into collaborative learning cultures by focusing their energy and time on grade-level teaching teams, schools, and entire districts (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). Through such efforts, educators establish networks for exploring pedagogical issues, satisfying new teachers’ expectations of community, fostering multidisciplinary curricula, and bringing community to schools. PLCs provide a channel for teacher leadership, dialogue, reflection, action, and promising practices, and they take such varied forms as those identified earlier, plus coaching/modeling/walk-through models and action learning projects (Aubusson, Steele, Dinham, & Brady, 2007). Faculty study groups have benefitted from peer mentoring and collective inquiry with

university faculty; in whole-school study groups especially, members reflect on and assess instruction, student learning, and achievement (Moyer et al., 2006; Mullen & Huting, 2008).

The role of the PLC principal necessitates a non-traditional way of thinking and acting. One could surmise that the “calling” is Deweyian in the sense that the principal is not the anointed leader through which all change originates and flows and through which accountability is solely rooted. As a non-autocratic synergist, the principal or school leadership team “creates the conditions” that help their colleagues to “continually improve upon their collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 309). This orientation reincarnates Dewey’s (1956/1991) stance that schooling conditions need to be changed to make room for innovations.

Effective leadership promotes organizational change by empowering subordinates to imagine and behave differently. Transactional aspects of leadership emphasize the capacity to work productively with systemic constraints that influence and shape one’s relationships with subordinates. High-stakes testing has exacerbated school leaders’ need to be creative about demonstrating the different characteristics of the three types of leadership (instructional, transactional, and transformational). Many leaders feel overwhelmed at the prospect of leading and collaborating in ways that overcome punitive systems, chains of command, and compartmentalization of roles. Change occurs, then, within the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession through the alignment of growth populations, organizational development, and culturally relevant curriculum (Cooper, Allen, & Bettez, 2009).

According to the educational leadership literature, greater effectiveness across different contexts has resulted where leaders have used a transformational approach (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Some may consider this stance a form of leadership typecasting, given the complexities of schooling environments that demand continual activation of transactional, transformational, and instructional components on the part of leaders. Such leadership behaviors, manifested as subordinate empowerment and shared governance, affect organizational leadership (Lowe et al., 1996).

However, PLC advocates must find creative ways to lead and to be led within in a world where high-stakes, mandated testing and performance pressures dampen the potential for transformational leadership. The reality, then, is that school leaders are not strictly democratic visionaries. As democratic accountable leaders, they straddle the competing agendas of democracy and accountability (Mullen, 2008). Attuned to how these forces compete against and complement one another, they can better assist their colleagues with the conflicting agendas and directions for change they endure. Democratically accountable leaders satisfy educational mandates while leading in ways that

are participatory, consensus building, empowering, and commensurate with improving teacher and student performance (Glickman, 1998). For example, PLC leaders who have received a district mandate to implement a language or literacy program within their schools would utilize democratic approaches for engaging teaching staff in shared decision making, consensus building, and joint ownership. Documented processes include setting common goals that are aligned with the school's mission and professional teaching standards and making contextually relevant decisions pertaining to classroom activities, teacher roles, and constituent involvement from parents, employers, and other stakeholders (Mullen, 2009).

The context of leadership is key to the change process. Khurana's (2002) provocative analysis of leadership in the corporate world applies to public schooling, with the point made that context needs more attention. The cult of heroic leadership is misleading, over-emphasizing the role of individual leaders at the cost of understanding more deeply the change process. If this is indeed the case, then the transactional leadership–transformational leadership binary is too simple for characterizing the work of school leaders. Complexity, contextuality, and uncertainty inform their decision making as democratic accountable leaders. Thus, there are times when instructional leaders have to be transactional, as in when something new needs to get underway; later on, they can be transformational by dispersing leadership. However, because the road to change is not linear, dispersing leadership does not ensure organizational improvement; hence, collaborative principals will find it necessary to be directive at times (DuFour et al., 2008).

Leaders who are inspired to nurture their community and achieve goals otherwise unattainable as individuals are better positioned to exercise leadership that is contextually and culturally relevant. They understand that PLCs need to focus on learning rather than teaching, be dedicated to developing a collaborative culture, and be committed to school improvement and student achievement (DuFour, 2004; Mullen & Hutingner, 2008). They also focus on other essential features of the change process, notably shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective inquiry, and inclusive membership (Stoll, Bolman, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

*Implications for mentoring.* In learner-centered PLCs, teachers facilitate learning and motivation and students hear the message that they can do well. They receive feedback that informs them of their learning progress, which reinforces the capacity for learning and improves self-esteem (Saphier, 2005; Schunk, 2008). In the DuFour et al (2008) study of high schools that converted to PLCs, students praised the caring staff whose mantra was that academic failure was not an option. They had made gains in self-efficacy (perceived capabilities), preparation for college, and college graduation. However, principals and others responsible for the professional development of their staff must

be aware that the self-efficacy of teachers also needs support, as their beliefs about their capabilities to perform influence their behavior and support of students (Schunk, 2008).

Hence, school leaders approach their PLC environment as a place for continual learning that benefits students and teachers alike. They model peer mentoring as a means for promoting multiple opportunities for staff learning through enhanced teamwork, reciprocal learning, and improved performance (Ellinger, 2002). Other actions taken by PLC mentoring leaders who facilitate change include mobilizing research-supported practice, performing functions that support adult learning (e.g., scheduling time for teachers to meet), assisting teacher groups with critically examining practice, and monitoring resistance to new forms of learning, particularly whole-school peer mentoring (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008; Murphy & Lick, 2005).

Principals who are collaborative mentors learn alongside their teachers to affect student achievement and school improvement (Murphy & Lick, 2005). Collaborative leaders immersed in analyzing student data, exploring research-based strategies, and studying academic outcomes evolve into dynamic community learners and even activists for professional learning (DuFour et al., 2008). Situated as such, they can better prioritize teachers' needs for assistance and, together with their faculties, set goals based on content knowledge and instructional skills. After these professional needs are addressed, practitioners can analyze student data results to identify teacher competencies needed for improving student learning. Faculty members can then work together to establish goals, identify strategies, and design programs to foster teacher growth (DuFour et al., 2008). For example, elementary educators who discern a drop in student reading or mathematics test scores from one grade to the next could collaboratively mentor one another across grades to increase understanding of the skills and competencies required of students and to improve their own monitoring toward goals.

The mentoring leadership model underscores the role and importance of accountability for school improvement, professional development, and student learning, but lopsided attention to this gives rise to technical/functional mentoring. This type of mentoring involves fewer players in decision-making and learning experiences, concentrates on the transfer of skills within training contexts, and reinforces the status quo. Collaborative mentoring – a more expansive concept of mentorship – promotes democratic accountability through lifelong learning, school-wide inclusiveness in reciprocal learning, collaborative practices, and shared governance (Mullen, 2009). Collaborative mentors intentionally seek to promote egalitarianism and diversity by bringing less powerful groups – traditionally women, minorities, new teachers, and students – into a network or culture. Practiced effectively, collaborative mentoring fosters synergy in such forms as cross-cultural relationships and compensatory learning



programs. Leaders must trust that teachers and students can govern themselves through dialogue that respects disagreements and differences.

Action research through the study group process is a particularly conducive collaborative mentoring model (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). Murphy and Lick (2005) posit that study groups should involve the participation of all faculty members focused on a common vision for student learning, serving both as a viable method for facilitating high-quality professional development and as an opportunity for increased learning that will likely impact student achievement. Wanda Gray Elementary School in Missouri includes all faculty members in study groups that meet weekly. Administrators, teachers, and counsellors are committed to principles that guide faculty study groups: students come first, everyone participates, leadership is shared, responsibility is equal, and work is public (Murphy & Lick, 2005). After analyzing student data, teachers may, for example, identify a need for teaching higher-order thinking skills.

Results from standards-driven tests and curricular assessments provide the basis for the work of study groups. Murphy and Lick (2005) describe how teachers analyze test scores and other data to identify student needs and then form study groups to determine how to best address perceived deficiencies. Study group participants strive to integrate effective practices into school programs that should positively affect student learning. Richardson (2007) reports that teacher teams in a secondary school in Michigan identify outcomes for each course, create common assessments, and monitor student progress. Curricular outcomes are determined by observing the impact of instructional strategies on student learning across grade levels and diverse groups.

Faculties participating in study groups jointly study their own instructional practices, enhance their learning, and build their capacity for leadership (DuFour, 2004; Gupton, 2003). When provided time to work together, teachers can develop or improve on instructional strategies, design effective lessons, focus on student achievement, expand their understanding of subject-area content and benchmarks, and address teaching problems (Hirsh, 2003).

Research on highly effective practices in teacher professional development affirms that participation in study groups affords teachers an opportunity to prioritize student needs and school improvement goals on a consistent basis and in a supportive context (Drago-Severson, 2004). At the close of a school year, more than 90% of teachers involved in study groups at an elementary school in Florida reported that the participation benefited their professional development, ability to analyze student data, and overall morale (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008).

Collaborative mentoring within PLC contexts depends on dynamic, high-quality relationships. Based on programmatic review of various PLCs, practitioners and others commit to the collaboration by producing a shared vision, seizing opportunities for significant and complex new role taking, integrating research

and theory, engaging in reflective analysis and the sharing of ideas, and including outside collaborators (Mullen, 2009). Head, Reiman, and Thies-Sprinthall's (1992) comprehensive review of school-based mentoring programmes produced similar findings for synergistic educational reform.

***Frame 2: Organization and the learning community***

PLCs can be locally directed or partnership oriented. Those extending beyond individual schools or districts may embrace regional and state agencies, networks, partnerships, universities, and communities (Stoll et al., 2006). Representatives from universities, foundations (e.g., The Holmes Partnership), and the surrounding community affect local school culture and the professional learning of teachers. Practitioners who enter into a school-university partnership are expected to work with school and university faculties; be knowledgeable of the requirements of the school, district, and university; understand the motives and research agendas of all parties involved; provide time for teachers to collaborate; and address areas of potential conflict (Moyer et al., 2006; Shroyer et al., 2007).

Research shows that the PLC idea is a potentially potent strategy for organizational change, specifically school improvement. Bullough and Baugh's (2008) assessment of a successful, long-term Utah partnership, steeped in John Goodlad's (2004) democratic agenda, identified initiatives that supported PLC development, such as ongoing study groups. A well-balanced argument presented by organizational change theorists addresses not only the promises of this reform as a school improvement strategy but also some of the limitations (Fullan, 2005). Notably, Johnson (2009) argued that proposed changes to traditional ways of schooling as exemplified by the PLC initiative must be informed by what is known about schools as organizations. He subjected this latest trend in school reform to critical thinking, holding up a mirror to the evangelical zeal of school reformers and consultants alike. PLC advocates are urged to question their buy-in and examine issues of impact and sustainability. Johnson concluded that benefits arise from schools modeling a culture of collaborative learning where they are organizationally structured to facilitate, institutionalize, and critique this learning dynamic.

The bandwagon mentality encompassing PLC innovations is vigilantly monitored by too few. PLC development cannot happen in a vacuum – instead, it must be supported through a shared vision, a purposeful agenda, and a commitment to the change process. Researchers involved in developing and assessing learning communities, and in preparing leaders to engage in complex work, have weighed the promises and pitfalls of PLCs and uphold them as worthy (Bullough & Baugh, 2008; Sudeck et al., 2009).

To emphasize, a PLC is an organizational reform initiative, a staff or professional development model, and an educational improvement strategy aimed at

building the capacity of schools. As a change model, the PLC is harnessed to promote campus-wide improvement, with student learning and achievement as primary goals. DuFour (2004) found that social networks are best operationalized when members work together, focus on learning, and hold themselves accountable to their vision and for results.

These organizationally minded theorists and practitioners believe that the PLC movement should be aligned with democratic aims and agendas that promote equity, inclusion, and success. In addition, they know that this intervention has yielded organizational capacity and human capital for schools, particularly where insider resources are complemented by outsider resources and where the localized content and pedagogical knowledge of teachers is not overshadowed by the expertise of outsiders (Klein, 2008). They also know the ins and outs of building a successful PLC, incorporating a decentralized structure, creating partnership alliances, and promoting teacher leadership.

Organizational conduits that are utilized for creating PLCs are school–university partnerships, PDSs, virtual learning communities, and, more recently, highly inclusive PLCs (Mullen, 2009). Through such vehicles, PLC members commit to a group learning process whereby they reflect on their own practice with an eye toward improving it. The teacher groups identify student-learning needs and appropriate courses of action and they engage in distributed leadership, collaborative inquiry, reflection, self-study, mentoring, coaching, and problem solving. Within viable PLCs, all levels of leadership are geared toward improving student learning, enhancing faculty development, and propelling organizational change through such means as supportive and shared leadership, core values, collective learning, conducive conditions, and collaborative practice. As a discourse community, PLCs become the means and supporting structure for schools to be continuously transformed and, as necessary, pushed to change. Persons at all levels of the educational system – such as state department personnel and parents – concerned about school improvement have an invested interest in this staff development model and can be fruitfully involved (DuFour et al., 2008).

*Implications for mentoring.* From an organizational perspective, mentoring within the PLC context is a “multi-dimensional support system” (Nora & Crisp, 2008, p. 342) that embeds social, organizational, and human capital (Allen & Poteet, 1999). As a system, mentoring incorporates goal setting, psychosocial support, subject knowledge, and role modeling. Within the systems model, collaborative mentors have challenged each other to understand their own processes of learning and identity development as mentors (Mullen, Migdal, & Rozell, 2003).

Even though multiple and complex forms of mentoring occur inside and outside the classroom within synergistic PLCs, it has the antiquated association of being an educational relationship between two people. A knowing,

experienced professional and a protégé or mentee commit, for example, to a coaching, non-evaluative relationship focusing on precise goals. While mentoring practiced as an isolated relational experience represents one valid mode, it limits the capacity of mentoring to function at the systems level where significant changes can occur.

From a systems perspective, it is also problematic that mentoring is equated with coaching, assisting, guiding, advising, leading, teaching, learning, readiness, compensation, support, and socialization (Rix & Gold, 2000). These terms emphasize discrete, isolated functions of mentoring only, not the comprehensive enterprise itself (Mullen, 2005). This overall disequilibrium in mentoring is reflected in public school culture. At best, seasoned educators and beginning teachers are connected within mentoring programs and relationships (Smylie, 1997). Within the vibrant PLC model, mentoring activity is relational, systematic, and system-wide; all are involved in co-learning and identity development as collaborative mentors.

A PLC that is organizationally-minded extends beyond the walls of schools and districts and embraces agencies, networks, institutions, and communities (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). A longitudinal evaluation of performance in Title I schools indicated that teacher outreach to parents produces gains in student performance in both reading and mathematics (Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001). Title I schools are designated as such because they have a high percentage of children from low-income families; these K–12 public schools are supported by governmentally funded school-wide services and resources to assist learners at greatest risk of failing to meet a state’s academic achievement standards (US Department of Education, 2010). Further, the inclusion of members from higher education, foundations, and the surrounding community affects local school culture and teacher learning. Building community with outside resources, school administrators pursue partnerships to support study groups. For example, the Missouri Partnership for Educational Renewal provides grants to partner schools that support study groups that embed improvement plans and professional development within this collaborative framework.

Collaborative mentors who are “systems thinking” work with faculty members to align reform orientations with professional learning. Systems thinkers who are relational strive to provide the necessary resources for enabling teachers to assume leadership roles as mentors, coaches, and master teachers. Principals, teacher leaders, and other collaborators dialogue with study group members about goals, review their action plans and weekly logs, give feedback and specific direction, and showcase accomplishments (Murphy & Lick, 2005). For example, in the case of a school faculty that has decided to use the study group structure to tackle the issue of low parental involvement in the school, group members would discuss how to proceed. They could read the relevant literature and consult associations for ideas and resources (e.g., National Coali-

tion for Parent Involvement in Education), as well as collect data from select parent groups and even confront what Tillman (2006) describes as teacher biases about ethnic and minority families' ability to function as educational partners. Such strategies can help practitioners become better informed about methods to use for reaching out to families from diverse backgrounds. Providing on-site language translation and facilitating workshops that deal with student learning and teacher bias are two such interventions.

*Frame 3: Culture and the learning community*

Because professional isolation is the norm in many North American public schools (DuFour et al., 2008), and because many students feel isolated on a daily basis (Dewey, 1956/1991), workplace culture must be changed. The problem of professional and personal isolation is the greatest hurdle that PLC initiators often face in creating synergistic collaborative cultures (DuFour et al., 2008). So that PLCs can make the expected gains, collaboration must be embedded in routine structures, and student and adult learning made pervasive (Mullen, 2009).

The cultural agenda for PLCs is to transform schools into communities and extend classrooms, pedagogies, and curricula into communities that enhance learning for students and teachers. The idea is to simultaneously engage insiders and outsiders, such as university faculty, in active and meaningful learning. Democratic schools are places where teachers, parents, students, and other constituent groups are heard; they make decisions, support diversity and equality, and value creating and sustaining the community. When necessary, change agents help alleviate problems with racism and power and resurrect inclusive and self-monitoring learning communities.

Research on PLCs reinforces the centrality of cultural elements in a school's success. Deal and Peterson (2009) refer to these elements as a shared sense of purpose, teacher involvement in decision making, and collaborative work around instruction. Members of PLCs may join forces with culturally different institutions and agencies that share school improvement and societal change as a vision and help build their capacity for change. Fullan (2005) underscores that working together purposefully in schools can form a daily habit, which, in turn, builds the capacity for leadership and sustainability. Culturally responsive learning communities are compensatory in nature, meaning that the members strive to address deficiencies in people's thoughts and behaviors. By committing to continuous inquiry and improvement, PLC communities propel change; the professional educators within them honor equitable schooling for all students, and they confront and transform their biases.

Beyond the transmission of cultural values, PLC development involves "growing pains" where the "challenge of learning, unlearning, and relearning" is inevitable as members negotiate their beliefs, values, and plans for action

(Klein, 2008, p. 88). They must allow themselves to become vulnerable and stretched through new relationships and conditions for learning. A perennial concern is that community building, which is “delicate” and “complex” (Aubusson et al., 2007, p. 134), necessitates respect for teachers, teacher choice, and teacher empowerment.

Members of PLCs who democratize their community are not just introspective – they are self-interrogating. They study social justice ideas and dynamics of change and sustainability to better understand their own environment. And they work hard, realizing that such efforts require their personal commitment and ongoing support. PLC leaders grapple with cultural diversity, difference, and inequality, to prepare others to interface with a pluralistic constituency. These elements fit well with intercultural learning, a theory and practice of human relations within a globally changing world that honors the principles of dialogue, collaboration, and learning among peers and between teachers and students (Jandt, 2010). Intercultural learning stresses confidence-building, mutual respect, human differences, constructed realities, deep knowing, conflict, and sensitivity (Jandt, 2010). When effectively applied, intercultural learning can move teachers from being conduits of knowledge to being generators of knowledge.

Global trends such as immigration and urbanization perpetuate demographic shifts across North America. PLC practitioners need to embrace culturally responsive agendas within demographically changing schools that build on intercultural learning and communication. They are being called upon to adopt an inclusive and egalitarian approach to collaborative learning, decision-making, and reform. Cooper et al. (2009) add that PLC members should prepare students and others to respond equitably to demographic change and perform cultural work. Often the cultural and linguistic diversity of students leads educators to perpetuate biased, reactionary, and exclusive practices; hence, critical multicultural orientations must be infused within learning milieus.

Demographic changes in society are outpacing reforms and accountability measures. The reforms are working too slowly to aid social justice agendas, hence the national emphasis on standardized testing measures and results has already “tipped” as a more encompassing legacy than democratic accountability for public schooling systems (Mullen et al., 2008). Yet the rapid changes in student diversity will continue to challenge school teams far beyond the scope of standardized assessment (Cooper et al., 2009), even as academic inequalities further widen. High schools are particularly resistant to change, even though “the warrant for high school reform has never been more urgent” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 1). Transformative leaders who align high-stakes testing with democratic goals strengthen the capacity and potential of traditionally underserved populations by, for example, confronting discriminatory practices that “silence” issues of “social class and socioeconomic status” (Shields & Mohan, 2008, p. 289).

*Implications for mentoring.* The idea of a mentor as somehow separate from or above the group that follows one's charge is outdated. Thus, beyond supporting individual and group learning, co-mentoring is a **catalyst for changing traditional practices**, hierarchical systems, and homogeneous cultures. Diversity is promoted when networks are inclusive and "unequal power relationships" are changed (Hansman, 2003, p. 105) and aligned with the principles of intercultural learning. Traditional mentoring relationships are hierarchical, limiting, and potentially harmful, which necessitates that mentors confront negative behaviours that include prejudice, ostracization, and silencing. Because not all mentors are comfortable with sharing or distributing power, democratic accountable school teams model expectations and monitor behaviour. A cultural force that weighs heavily on all schools is the widespread perception of the classroom teacher as an object of change, as opposed to a change agent. This disempowerment has been exacerbated by the current testing emphasis where faculties are viewed as curricular vessels of mandated student testing and content standards (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In such normative public school contexts, the principal is the crucial factor in the perception of faculty power and teachers' ability to exercise power as change agents (Murphy & Lick, 2005).

Depending on the school culture in which professional learning and partnering takes place, mentoring can be informal or formal. Mentoring is enacted through the informality of a learning community or the formality of a Professional Development School (PDS), partnership, or network, in some cases contractually agreed. The learning that occurs through various professional communities is framed by particular initiatives, such as the study group, staff development, and collaborative mentoring (Mullen, 2009). For example, within a university-school PDS located in a mid-Atlantic state that partnered a local university with 12 public schools, the teachers actively sought an authentic partnership. Notably, they solicited critical feedback from their university partners, asking that their relationship transcend a mere liaison to become a fully participatory, substantial partnership (Sudeck et al., 2009). The mentoring relationship that is collaborative at this level can produce reciprocal benefits for multiple parties, supporting academic performance and instructional experiences where partners meet regularly, engage in meaningful work, and develop plans that improve student learning (Sudeck et al., 2009). Importantly, co-learning that embeds principles of justice, fairness, and equity enacts a deep cultural exchange among different stakeholders. Collaborative mentoring generates cultural change through active engagement among participants committed to relationships that are themselves critically reflexive, supportive learning partnerships (Johnson, 2006; Mullen, 2005).

Instructional contexts and mentoring relationships are ideologically infused. Alternative mentoring is expressed as mentors and mentees engage in shared learning and power across differences in race, gender, and age. Technical/

transactional leadership is not oriented toward confronting dynamics of power, control, and regulation. While technical and alternative mentoring may be theoretically dichotomous, they are not easily separable in practice. Constructive engagement and fair treatment can result from technical/transactional leadership approaches to mentoring, and so it is not without educational value. But, the power and authority, and the efficiency and competitive values, implicit in technical mentoring undermine the capacity for collaborative mentoring (Hansman, 2003). School teams must be intentional about the mentoring they model and about treating cultural and individual differences as a strength and resource. Cultural changes have transpired through support systems and resources that build cultural capacity and teacher control over student learning (Mullen, 2009).

Cultural change is evident in schools where students have benefitted from formative assessments that help them to reflect and improve, unlike summative assessments that deny their potential for growth (Saphier, 2005). Conditions for learning improve when teachers frequently monitor student learning, use a variety of instructional strategies, and explore issues of quality and rigour in teams (DuFour et al., 2008). Students also benefit from being taught ways to monitor their learning progress. The perception of progress builds motivation to continue to improve (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). When teachers believe their actions matter, and when they experience a sense of consequentiality propelled by disciplined curiosity, deepened collegiality, and collective power, they tend to feel motivated to collaborate in their many roles as connected leaders, organizational members, cultural moderators, and active learners (Fullan & Hargraves, 1991). Because learning and motivation are intimately connected, their explicit integration within low-performing PLC schools and partner sites can make the difference. Teachers who set student learning goals and monitor students' progress are apt to feel more confident and motivated to continue (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). They believe that all students can learn and meet high academic standards. The belief in students' "effort-based ability" (Saphier, 2005, p. 86) is reflected beyond the individual level at leadership, organizational, and cultural levels.

## CONCLUSION

The PLC fosters improvement that extends beyond the professional learning of staff to the sense of joint responsibility for student growth, giving adults focus and direction (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Ironically, the interrelated dynamics of student learning, motivation, mentoring, achievement, and assessment seem under-developed, yet learning is the centerpiece of the PLC concept (e.g., DuFour et al., 2005). Hence, the learning component needs more attention with respect to practice-based outcomes and associations with leadership, organization, and culture.



The efforts demonstrated within PLCs range in the importance of the work accomplished within them, and in their degree of effectiveness, capacity for outreach, and circumference of inclusion. They also vary in the synergy generated, the ideas of mentoring and models utilized, and the fulfillment of their promises. The concept of professional learning is not new but the practical side of developing professional communities that are reciprocal, democratic, and sustainable is more recent. In successful PLCs, members have confronted the daunting challenges of developing and applying shared knowledge; sustaining the hard work of change; and transforming school culture (DuFour et al., 2005; Klein, 2008). Other challenges include understanding better the circumstances and needs of low socioeconomic schools and the capacity of practitioners to engage in work that is political, experimental, and unfinished.

Metaphorically speaking, schools are not ships. Schools are highly complex communities and, as such, they are not still waters through which a straight course is maintained in order to arrive at a predicted point, such as competitive school performance rankings. Hence, practitioners constantly account for “currents” or forces that alter the course, speed, and direction of their “ship.” The best PLCs offer the vision, flexibility, and creativity to make the necessary adjustments toward the desired goals.

PLCs are not all created “equal.” Some are more committed to learning and collaborating than others in ways ranging from the decentralized to the centralized, informal to the formal, and the cursory to the comprehensive (Johnson, 2009; Sudeck et al., 2009). We recommend more in-depth treatments of learning in relation to leadership, organization, and culture that favour deep, extended inquiry. School teams that implement collaborative mentoring changes within their workplaces build organizational capacity, generate social capital, and positively impact communities.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank the reviewers for their helpful reviews of the earlier version of this article.

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