

COLLABORATIVE TEAMS THAT
Transform
SCHOOLS

THE NEXT STEP IN PLCS

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Reproducible pages are in italics.

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Introduction

The importance of collaboration in general has been prominent in the literature on education since at least the 1970s, and the concept of a *professional learning community* (PLC) in particular has been prevalent since at least the 1990s. The central theme of this book is that the PLC process is on the verge of a quantum leap in terms of its influence on the functioning of a school and, ultimately, its influence on student learning. This next step will take place by expanding the responsibilities of collaborative teams, enabling them to transform the scope and content of the curriculum, the nature and function of classroom assessments, the manner in which instruction is planned and executed, the system in which teachers develop and the way schools are led. These proposed changes to curriculum, assessment, instruction, teacher development and school leadership have been circulating for years but have never before been directly connected to the inner workings of a collaborative team and the interaction between collaborative teams. In effect, this book provides a picture of collaborative teams and the PLC process hitherto not seen – a picture we believe represents the long-term future of PLCs.

We begin with a brief but comprehensive review of the research and theory behind the PLC movement. Although you might be eager to move right into those chapters that provide practical recommendations for educators, we strongly encourage you to examine the research and theory, as it is the foundation for the book. Indeed, a basic purpose of *Collaborative Teams That Transform Schools* is to present the most useful strategies based on the strongest research and theory available.

Following our discussion of the historical and theoretical context of the PLC movement, chapter 2 explores the schoolwide and team-specific cultural foundations that support effective PLCs. Chapters 3 through 6 each present an area of education that can be transformed by collaborative teams: curriculum, assessment, instruction and teacher development. Finally, chapter 7 considers the role of school leaders in supporting and advancing the PLC process.

How to Use This Book

Educators can use *Collaborative Teams That Transform Schools* as a self-study text that presents a complete model of effective PLCs. Each chapter explains steps and strategies educators can implement to enhance the PLC process. As you progress through the chapters, you will also encounter comprehension questions. It is important to complete these questions and compare your answers with those in appendix A (page 113).

Table 1.1: The Six Questions and Their Emphases

Question	Area of Emphasis
What is it we want our students to know?	Curriculum
How will we know if our students are learning?	Assessment
How will we respond when students do not learn?	Instruction
How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?	Instruction
How will we increase our instructional competence?	Teacher development
How will we coordinate our efforts as a school?	Leadership

As indicated in table 1.1, the first question (What is it we want our students to know?) is fundamentally a curriculum issue. The second question (How will we know if our students are learning?) is an assessment issue. The third question (How will we respond when students do not learn?) and fourth question (How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?) are both instructional issues. The fifth question (How will we increase our instructional competence?) deals with teacher development. The sixth question (How will we coordinate our efforts as a school?) deals with leadership. These six questions not only offer a new perspective on the PLC process but can also serve as transformational forces when answered in specific ways. Before we consider these questions and their respective emphases, we first consider the historical and theoretical development of the PLC process.

The Nature of Organisations

Organisations, by definition, are made up of people and their interactions. Within an organisation, no one truly acts independently; one's actions and behaviours affect – and are affected by – the actions and behaviours of other members of the organisation. As Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton (2000) put it, “Behavior and performance are influenced by the actions, attitudes and behaviors of many others in the immediate environment” (p. 158). Organisational theorist Donald A. Schön (1983) described organisations as “repositories of cumulatively built-up knowledge: principles and maxims of practice, images of mission and identity, facts about the task environment, techniques of operation, stories of past experience which serve as exemplars for future action” (p. 242). In other words, organisations have the ability to store information.

However, a great deal of the organisational knowledge that develops over time cannot be stored formally – written procedures and other documents do not suffice to record practical or tacit knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Instead, this information exists within the dynamics of the organisation itself, “by the stories people tell to each other, by the trials and errors that occur as people develop knowledge and skill, by inexperienced people watching those more experienced, and by experienced people providing close and constant coaching to newcomers” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 19). In light of these ideas about the ways knowledge is shared within organisations, it seems rather intuitive that increased collaboration would lead to an increase in both organisational and individual knowledge.

Another hindrance to wide PLC implementation is skepticism and resistance to change among staff:

Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation. Even in schools that endorse the idea of collaboration, the staff's willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door. (DuFour, 2004, p. 9)

The level of collaboration required in a PLC is a substantial change from the way most teachers have done their jobs in the past. Some teachers prefer working alone, viewing collaboration as a waste of time or an impediment to getting work done; others doubt that collaboration positively impacts student achievement (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010). Research disputes these opinions, however, showing that teamwork can have a significant positive impact.

Benefits of the PLC Process

Research on the topic of collaboration from fields such as cognition and expertise supports the most general and fundamental assumption of PLCs – that working together produces better results than working alone. Some theories of cognition posit that thinking and reasoning are most effective when distributed across a system or group rather than confined to an individual (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Consider the example of a navy ship (Hutchins, 1990, 1991): numerous crewmembers perform specific tasks, ultimately working together to complete work too complex for one person to do alone.

Collaboration also plays an important role in reflective practice. Reflective practice is an important pathway to expertise in education and other disciplines. It is also difficult to engage in reflective practice alone. Indeed, Schön (1983) stated, “The teacher’s isolation in her classroom works against reflection-in-action. She needs to communicate her private puzzles and insights, to test them against the views of her peers” (p. 333). Collaborative problem-solving is, in general, superior to problem-solving in isolation simply because a group provides more perspectives on an issue. Interaction with others “expand[s] and test[s] the new concepts as part of the learning experience” (Morrissey, 2000, p. 4). A similar dynamic applies to growth and learning about oneself. Even extremely self-aware and critical people have blind spots, but input and feedback from others can help identify and improve them (Brookfield, 1995).

These more general benefits of collaboration are further supported by research on PLCs and collaboration in schools. In the following sections, we explore how the PLC process benefits teachers, students and school leaders.

Benefits for Teachers

One of the most frequently proposed benefits of the PLC process is that it offers a more effective means of providing professional learning opportunities to teachers. As explained by V. Darleen Opfer and David Pedder (2011), “Most research has concluded that activities that effectively support teachers’ professional learning need to be sustained and intensive rather than brief and sporadic” (p. 384). As a structure that is designed to engage teachers in collaborative professional work over an extended period of time, PLCs are more likely to be effective sources of professional growth for teachers than more traditional one-time presentations (Guskey, 2000; Hawker & Valli, 1999; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

In general, collaboration appears to engender significant professional growth if teachers are willing to explore and analyse important aspects of their practice (Servage, 2008, 2009). One 2009 survey of American

educators found that the majority believe that collaboration would have a positive effect on their own success and that of their students (MetLife, 2009):

- Sixty-seven per cent of teachers and 78 per cent of principals surveyed believe that increased collaboration would significantly impact student achievement.
- Ninety per cent of teachers surveyed agreed that “other teachers contribute to their success in the classroom” (MetLife, 2009, p. 12).

As a by-product of enhancing teachers’ instructional prowess, PLCs can also help establish a culture in which teachers feel more empowered in their work. In a 2009 study by Patricia Hoffman, Anne Dahlman and Ginger Zierdt, the researchers surveyed 56 teachers who had participated in a PLC program and found extremely high rates of agreement with items regarding the experience’s positive impacts on their teaching practice as well as their feelings of efficacy. Their findings are summarised in table 1.4.

Table 1.4: PLC Survey Items with High Rates of Agreement

Survey Question	Percentage of Teachers Who Responded “Agree/Strongly Agree”
Participating in a PLC assisted me to develop new knowledge and skills.	95.5
Participating in a PLC helped me establish or strengthen professional networks.	95.5
I felt a sense of belonging in my PLC.	90.0
I believe the PLC was a place where my voice was heard, respected and valued.	100.0
I believe my participation in the PLC will have a long-term impact.	94.4
My participation in the PLC translated into tangible, concrete actions.	90.0
I believe a PLC is a place to develop a plan of action.	95.5

Source: Adapted from Hoffman et al., 2009, p. 36.

A 2013 survey of educators found similar correlations between collaboration and “valued professional learning outcomes” (National Center for Literacy Education, 2013, p. 20). Respondents who indicated agreement with the survey item “Collaboration is a routine part of how we do our jobs here” were likely to also agree with statements regarding high levels of trust, exchange of information about best practices, allowance to try new ideas and use of student data (National Center for Literacy Education, 2013, p. 20).

Although one of the goals of a PLC is to improve teachers’ instructional practice, it is important to note that individual improvement alone is not enough. Research suggests that professional learning communities provide a unique, schoolwide perspective on pedagogy (Louis & Marks, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Fred M. Newmann and Gary G. Wehlage (1995) explained that schoolwide “authentic pedagogy ... calls for channeling individual human commitment and competence into collective organizational productivity. Schools need to have a clear, shared purpose ... collaborative activity ... and collective responsibility” (p. 51). Similarly, DuFour and Marzano (2011) suggested that “the focus must shift from helping individuals become more effective in their isolated classrooms and schools, to creating a new collaborative culture based on interdependence, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability” (p. 67). Distributed knowledge, collective capacity and shared responsibility are much more powerful than the abilities of even the best teachers working

in isolation. In fact, “a school’s social capital – the connections between educators and the extent to which they exchange and build on each other’s knowledge – is just as powerful a predictor of student achievement as raw human capital – the skills of individual teachers” (National Center for Literacy Education, 2013, p. 14). Additionally, collaborative structures make the professional learning process more efficient and more sustainable. Teachers can learn from each other’s ideas and experiments; when an expert teacher leaves a school, much of their knowledge will remain (National Center for Literacy Education, 2013). As mentioned previously, organisational connectedness allows for the storage of tacit knowledge.

A second benefit for teachers in the PLC process is the potential for increased satisfaction with their careers. To better understand this benefit, consider the following model of job satisfaction. Studies summarised by Frederick Herzberg (1987) suggested that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are two separate spectrums, each affected by a distinct set of factors. In this model, not being *dissatisfied* with one’s job does not necessarily mean that one is *satisfied*. In the same way, low satisfaction does not mean high dissatisfaction. Job dissatisfaction is affected by “hygiene” factors – basic elements such as company policy, relationships at work, salary and job security. When these elements are positive, dissatisfaction is low; when these elements are lacking or negative, dissatisfaction increases. Job satisfaction, on the other hand, is affected by “motivators” such as growth, responsibility, recognition and achievement. As these elements increase, satisfaction increases. Considering these two independent elements (dissatisfaction and satisfaction), it is clear that raising an employee’s salary or improving other hygiene factors is not enough to create true job satisfaction – only to decrease dissatisfaction. The factors that contribute to satisfaction require creating opportunities for growth, increased responsibility and recognition. Table 1.5 displays components that influence satisfaction and dissatisfaction respectively.

Table 1.5: Influences on Job Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

Satisfaction	Dissatisfaction
Growth	Company policies
Responsibility	Relationships with co-workers
Recognition	Salary
Achievement	Job security

Along these lines, Edward L. Deci and his colleagues (2001) presented a model of job satisfaction and fulfilment that centres on three factors: (1) competence, (2) autonomy, and (3) relatedness. *Competence* means engaging in appropriately challenging tasks (not too difficult or too easy) and achieving success. *Autonomy* means having options and making decisions for oneself. *Relatedness* means interacting with other people and experiencing mutual respect and care. When these factors are met, employees are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their work and experience better overall mental health. PLCs have the potential to increase these motivational factors for teachers. For example, as a result of the collaborative structure inherent in PLCs, teachers have opportunities to make decisions on a regular basis. This empowers teachers and provides autonomy; they do not just receive and carry out directives from school leaders. Stated differently, “Decentralization of decision making encourages people to learn because they know they will have the opportunity and, indeed, the responsibility to use their knowledge in their daily activities” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 103). Overall, teachers in schools with higher levels of collaboration are more likely to be very satisfied with teaching as a career (68 per cent versus 54 per cent in schools with lower levels of collaboration; MetLife, 2009).

As might be inferred from the preceding discussion, PLCs require reconceptualising one's definition of the job of a teacher. Lee Shulman (2004) described teaching as “perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented” (p. 504) and, in comparing the challenges of teaching to those of other professions, posited that “the only time medicine even approaches the complexity of an average day of classroom teaching is in an emergency room during a natural disaster” (p. 504). In the face of questions about instructional practice, difficult students and so on, the best resource for a teacher may be their colleagues (Rosenholtz, 1991). If one also considers that “teachers’ regard for their work – their sense of optimism, hope and commitment – tends to reside in workplace conditions that enable them to feel professionally empowered and self-fulfilled” (Rosenholtz, 1991, p. 165), it becomes clear that meaningful collaboration can help teachers develop a sense of efficacy and, as a result, help increase student achievement.

Benefits for Students

A growing research base supports the claim that PLCs lead to improved student outcomes. Valerie E. Lee, Julia B. Smith and Robert G. Croninger (1995, 1997) studied high school students’ achievement gains on maths and science questions and reported that the PLC process “is strongly and positively associated with both effectiveness and equity in learning in both mathematics and science” (1997, p. 139). In both maths and science, students from high schools where teachers had higher levels of collective responsibility achieved greater gains than students from less collaborative schools (1995). These results suggest that when collaborative structures are in place, “more learning occurs” (1997, p. 142). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found similar results: the higher the level of professional collaboration at a school, the higher students’ achievement.

Karen Seashore Louis and Helen Marks (1996) analysed data from 24 schools to examine the relationship between the quality of professional community and student achievement. They found moderate correlations between the quality of professional collaboration and both the quality of classroom pedagogy (.36, $P \leq .01$) and student achievement (.26, $P \leq .001$, adjusted for year level and student background). In other words, “The achievement level is significantly higher to the extent that schools are strong professional communities” (p. 19). The researchers concluded, “Our findings strongly support ... that the organization of teachers’ work in ways that promote professional community will have significant effects on the organization of classrooms for learning and the academic performance of students” (p. 26).

Another study of collaborative schools and students’ test results found that the majority of PLC schools reported increases in students’ scores over a three-year period. For mathematics, 90.6 per cent of PLC schools had increases; for reading and English, 98.4 per cent of PLC schools saw their students’ scores go up (Hughes & Kritsonis, 2007).

In 2008, Vicki Vescio, Dorene Ross and Alyson Adams provided the following summary of the effects of learning communities on teachers and students:

Participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered. In addition, teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning; [finally,] when teachers participate in a learning community, students benefit as well, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time. (p. 88)

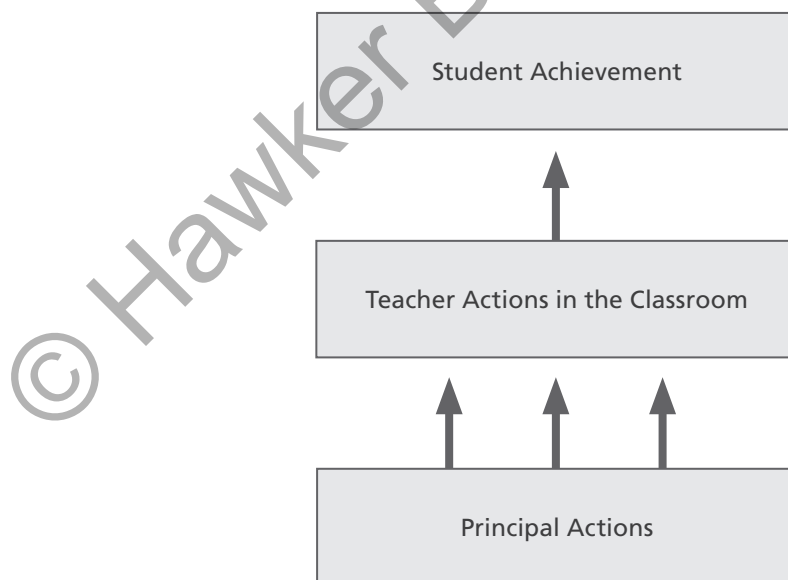
Further research has continued to support these findings. For example, Fulton and Britton (2011) analysed six previous studies on collaborative structures and student learning in mathematics; all six studies found

positive effects. In addition to increased achievement across content areas, studies have shown that PLCs lead to decreased student absences and a lower dropout rate (National Center for Literacy Education, 2013; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). In a 2005 study, researchers found that “pupil learning was the foremost concern of people working in PLCs and the more developed a PLC appeared to be, the more positive was the association with two key measures of effectiveness – pupil achievement and professional learning” (Bolam et al., 2005, p. 146). In short, a wide range of research over several decades has shown that the existence of effective PLCs is associated with enhanced student achievement.

Benefits for Leaders

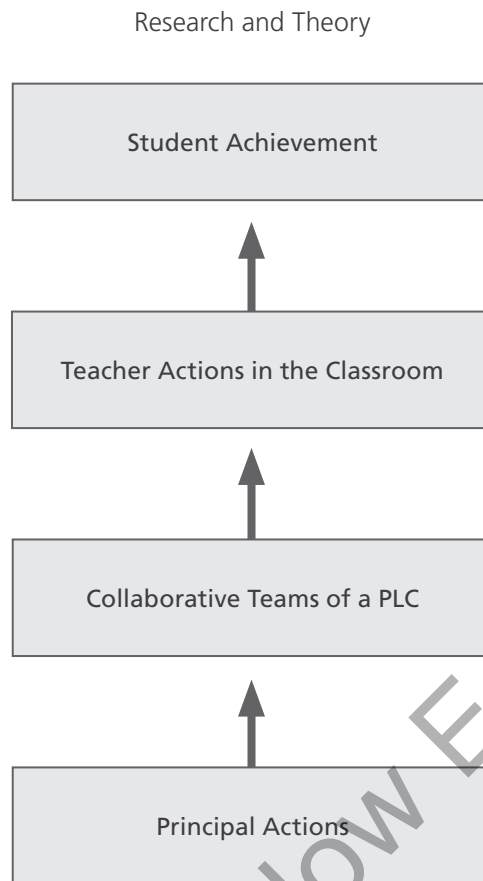
In addition to providing benefits for teachers and students, PLCs benefit school leaders by increasing their ability to support teacher development and student achievement. The classroom teacher has a direct effect on the achievement of their students, but it is also true that school leadership has an effect on student achievement, albeit indirectly (Day et al., 2009; Lee, Louis & Anderson, 2012; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Witziers, Bosker & Kruger, 2003).

DuFour and Marzano (2011) provided a perspective on the manner in which PLCs can change interactions between school leaders and teachers. To illustrate, consider figure 1.1, which depicts the manner in which a principal in a school without PLCs affects student achievement. In schools without PLCs, school leaders must work with teachers individually to enhance their actions in the classroom, which, in turn, will have a positive effect on student achievement. In a large school with many teachers, this quickly becomes unmanageable for the principal. By contrast, in a school that has implemented the PLC process, the principal can more directly influence collaborative teams. The collaborative teams, in turn, have direct influence on teachers’ classroom practice, which then affects student achievement (shown in figure 1.2).



Source: DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 49. Used with permission.

Figure 1.1: Typical relationship between principal behaviour and student achievement.



Source: DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 52. Used with permission.

Figure 1.2: Relationship between principal behaviour and student achievement within PLCs.

In short, professional learning communities allow school leaders to have a powerful effect on student achievement.

Translating Research and Theory into Practice

In the ensuing chapters, we draw on the research and theory presented here to provide practical steps that schools wishing to engage in the PLC process can undertake. As explained previously, we present a new approach to answering DuFour and his colleagues' four critical questions and add two new questions. The complete set is as follows.

1. What is it we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. How will we respond when students do not learn?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?
5. How will we increase our instructional competence?
6. How will we coordinate our efforts as a school?



Self-Evaluation for Chapter 2

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. We have established schoolwide norms that focus on a collective effort to improve student learning.					
2. We have established the structures necessary for the PLC process, including:					
• Collaborative teams					
• A schedule that provides collaborative time					
• Distributed leadership					
3. We have established collaborative team norms.					
4. We continually monitor adherence to norms.					
5. We seek to develop trust among team members.					
6. We have set up processes for productive collaboration, including:					
• Healthy discussion guidelines					
• Efficient work procedures					

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Collaborative Team Rating Scales

Collaborative teams should periodically conduct formal audits of their collaboration and productivity. This scale, modelled after a proficiency scale, is intended to help collaborative teams measure their progress with regard to the functionality of the team. Teams can assess what level of the scale they have reached by comparing their work to the descriptions and sample indicators in figure A.3. Teams or schools can also use the blank reproducible (page 134) to create a customised autonomy scale and record evidence of their work at each level.

Score	Description	Indicators
Score 4.0	Operational Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective ownership of student achievement is evident in practice and products. Productive culture of collaboration is evident in practice and products. SMART goals are clearly defined and progress towards goals is monitored. The norms guide all practice and are evaluated for effectiveness by the team. 	<p>Critical areas such as curriculum, instruction, assessment and teacher development are the focus of meetings and agenda items.</p> <p>Common assessment data are a key element of team decision-making.</p> <p>SMART goal progress monitoring is in place.</p> <p>Periodically, the team reviews the norms to ensure they are being followed.</p>
Score 3.0	Developing Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective ownership of student achievement is emerging in some practices and products. Collaborative culture is emerging but not constant in practices and products. SMART goals are clearly defined. The norms are established and members hold themselves and each other accountable to the norms. 	<p>Critical areas such as curriculum, instruction, assessment and teacher development are sometimes the focus of meetings and agenda items.</p> <p>Collaboration is taking place on most issues within the scope of the collaborative team.</p> <p>SMART goals are appropriate and clearly defined.</p>
Score 2.0	Partial Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual ownership of student achievement is the predominant practice among team members. Collaboration is occurring on specific issues. SMART goals are defined but may need revision. The norms are established and individuals hold themselves accountable to the norms. 	<p>Teachers operate with a more individual focus on their practice and their specific students.</p> <p>Some aspects of team collaboration are beginning to occur.</p>
Score 1.0	No Autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Norms have not been established. SMART goals have not been established. Collaboration is not evident. 	<p>Teachers actively avoid collaboration in favour of working alone.</p>

Figure A.3: Collaborative team autonomy scale.