

Success for Our Youngest Learners

Embracing the PLC at Work[®] Process
at the Early Childhood Level

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INTRODUCTION

During my tenure as principal of an early childhood center, I encountered many educators of young children who believed that the professional learning community (PLC) process did not apply to them. However, the PLC process as articulated by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos (2016) is a powerful way to ensure that all students learn at high levels. *All* should include the youngest students, too. As an educator of young children, you may not be included in the PLC conversations in your school. You may not yet be familiar with the basic premises of a PLC or understand yet how you can apply the concepts to yourself and your students. But this paradigm can and must shift. Your students are part of the *all*, and you need to be included in these important conversations and learning opportunities.

For seventeen years, I led Willow Grove Kindergarten and Early Childhood Center, part of Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 (KCSD 96) in Illinois, which has been recognized as a model PLC. Teachers from as far away as Australia and as close as next door visited our school district. They wanted to see teams meeting and collaborating, students learning, and the PLC process in action. Our visitors were always surprised that not only did we have an early childhood center but that it was part of our districtwide PLC. These visiting early childhood educators found it difficult to understand how they could apply the PLC process to their programs for young children. They had seen it work at the elementary level in their own school districts, but they believed early childhood education was different. While early childhood education has unique challenges and needs, the PLC process is the best way to meet these challenges and needs—I believe to the benefit of all. I was determined to let our wondering visitors know that extending the PLC process to the early childhood or preK level (that is, students aged three to five) could increase student learning and strengthen their own teaching skills. This book illustrates how to bring about a transformation in any early childhood program that will give it the capability to function as part of the school or district PLC.

The visiting preK teachers with whom I spoke over the years expressed hesitance to entertain the value of PLCs for early childhood education for a variety of reasons, but a reason that featured prominently in their hesitance again and again was their aversion to the idea of including assessment practices in the education of very young children—and assessment is always part of an effective PLC. They had this assumption that testing is just not for the preK level, that it's not a developmentally appropriate practice. These preK teachers did not really understand the power of assessments or how to design or administer them. If these teachers did assess, they did it at a student's entrance into their program, and often they did nothing with whatever results emerged from their version of assessment. They were unclear how to use data effectively in order to provide support and enrichment to their students. In fact, there are appropriate ways to assess young children that provide important data. I go into much more detail in chapter 5 (page 87).

I explained that, initially, Willow Grove teachers also avoided assessing students' learning, and, indeed, did not see the value in formalized assessment practices. Instead, each classroom teacher determined (in his or her own way) what skills each student in the class had achieved, and they reported their perspectives on assessment to parents at conference time. However, Willow Grove teachers came to realize that in order to commit fully to the PLC process, they needed to commit to engaging in thoughtful, formalized assessment and data analysis practices—with the young children they teach. I will explain more about this transition and using data to design interventions in early education in chapter 6 (page 103).

At Willow Grove, we began working together and functioning as a PLC in the early 2000s. We started small, with just a few assessments, but continued the journey every day, week, month, and year. I prompted the staff to start with assessments when I noticed that each preK teacher favored different learning skills. Some thought that students must be able to identify eight colors while others felt that only five were important. We started simply with color recognition just to see what information we could gather. We had to agree, as a team, what the most important colors were that we would all assess. We had to collaborate.

Our staff learned that collaborating to discuss student learning would provide students with the best education possible and the opportunity to achieve high levels of learning. We learned this along with our colleagues in every school in the district. We all began to see positive results in student achievement, and we all began to feel a positive energy as professionals. As an administrator, it was helpful for me to be able to discuss the PLC concept with my peers, just as it was for teachers.

Our experience at Willow Grove led me to write this book specifically for teachers of young children. Teacher leaders, school leadership teams, instructional coaches, and school administrators with early childhood programs as part of their schools may also find it useful. Information in this book will help central office staff understand how important it is that PLCs include all programs in their school districts.

I know that preK teachers believe in the power of high-quality early childhood education and the important role it plays in a student's schooling. This belief is better than any professional development seminar, workshop, training, or conference I have experienced. And while professional development trainings can be very beneficial, the training my staff needed first was not to be found in outside experiences but in learning how to function together and become a PLC. They were in need of job-embedded professional development along with those outside workshops and conferences.

Job-embedded professional learning is

learning that is grounded in day-to-day practice and is designed to enhance professional practice with the intent of improving children's learning and development. . . . It consists of teams of professionals assessing and finding solutions for authentic and immediate problems of practice as part of a cycle of continuous improvement. (Pacchiano, Klein, & Hawley, 2016, p. 7)

They needed the necessary tools to become a PLC, and they had to make some paradigm shifts to build those tools for themselves. These shifts started with a shared belief, and they leveraged what they already believed to open their minds to new ideas and to learning new things.

PLCs and the Importance of Effective Early Childhood Programs

Implementing the PLC process in early childhood education can increase student learning. In their study of exemplary preschools, psychologist Hirokazu Yoshikawa et al. (2013) "report strong evidence that preschools boost children's language, literacy, and math skills in the short term; it may also reduce problem behaviors such as aggression" (p. 1). Their report states that high-quality preK programs are associated with larger effect sizes; the teachers at these schools have time to collaborate and use the tools of a PLC (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Yoshikawa et al. (2013) also report that there is evidence of a positive and statistically significant relationship between teacher collaboration and student success.

President George W. Bush created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education in October 2001. In July 2002, the commission released its findings and recommendations in *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families* (U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002). One of the highlights of this report was the evidence in its findings indicating the importance of early intervention. In July 2013, Karen E. Diamond, Laura M. Justice, Robert S. Siegler, and Patricia A. Snyder released a research synthesis that supports this conclusion. Their report states that early childhood programs are "particularly important for closing the gap in early skills among children experiencing risk factors relative to more-advantaged children" (Diamond et al., 2013, p. 37).

Early childhood, beginning in infancy, is a period of profound advancement in reasoning and language acquisition for children. The achievement gap between U.S. students of differing income classes and between different races and ethnicities appears even before kindergarten (President's Council of Economic Advisors [PCEA], 2014). Early childhood programs are opportunities to make a dent in closing this gap, but only if their quality is high. This means that early educators have a potentially large role in shaping this gap closure.

Researchers have confirmed that attending a preschool program prior to entering kindergarten has significant positive effects on students. Favorable outcomes in cognition, social skills, and school progress were noted to have the highest results (Smith, 2014). In a National Institute for Early Education Research policy brief, the research confirms that participation in a preschool program improves a student's academic achievement regardless of background or personal circumstances (Barnett, Brown, & Shore, 2004). Early childhood researcher and professor Anne B. Smith (2014) confirms, "High-quality, intensive ECE programs have positive effects on cognitive development, school achievement and completion, especially for low-income children in model programs designed to ameliorate poverty" (p. 3).

Research also reveals that preschools offering high-quality programs and superior teachers can do the following: they narrow the achievement gap for all students, lead to greater education attainment and higher earnings as adults, lower involvement with the criminal justice system, and reduce the need for remedial education and special education placement (Barnett et al., 2004; Meloy, Gardner, & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

The evidence is clear that students with better early childhood care and education grow up to be more likely to work, earn higher wages, have better health, pay more in taxes, and draw on fewer government resources. Author and educator

Jonathon Saphier (2005) asserts that PLCs improve teachers and their teaching. Better teaching, in turn, improves student learning. PLCs provide teachers with the opportunity to improve their teaching and to ensure that all students learn at high levels. They can supply students with programs before they enter the K–12 system that will better their chances of success in their adult lives. The bottom line is that the earlier we intervene, the more effective we will be. The better our early childhood programs are, the more successful our students will be. Through the PLC process, we can make our programs better so that *all* students learn at high levels.

The Challenges of Collaboration for Early Childhood Educators

Due to “organizational differences, it is not a straightforward task to apply elementary practices to early childhood classroom settings” (Diamond et al., 2013, p. 39). Differences in schedules, professional development opportunities, and financial compensation for teachers create a chasm between preK staff and the rest of the elementary school staff. A pattern emerges in which collaborative curriculum planning for general education teachers, special education teachers, and preschool teachers is not very organized. There is often a disconnect between preK teachers and elementary teachers. Collaboration between these teachers is often limited and more separate than coordinated. These groups of teachers tend to plan individually rather than together (Nilsen, 2017).

Being the only preK teacher in a building can be overwhelming. When I taught preschool, my classroom was in a mobile unit outside the school building. Talk about being isolated. This feeling does not have to be the case. Schools and districts that function as PLCs have access to collaborative processes that can support teachers of young children. Policymakers and educators alike often think about early education, special education, and general education as three separate systems. This conception needs to change. PreK programs need to be considered as part of the traditional K–12 school system. Your programs are part of the education continuum.

A cultural shift in all classrooms and settings that serve young children needs to take place to implement the PLC process. PreK teachers need to see themselves as part of the total school. Collaborating across grade levels gives teachers the opportunity for fresh insight and support. For example, maybe a teacher of a higher grade level has novel ideas about how you could build algebraic thinking skills for kindergarteners. Teachers and schools must take collective responsibility for the learning of *all* students and the belief that all students can learn at high levels.

Think about a child who is important to you. Is it a son, daughter, niece, nephew, or grandchild? Why is this child so important? What is it that you wish for his or her future? Of course, you want the best for your loved one, and you would do almost anything in your power for this child to succeed and to learn at the highest levels possible. You would want him or her to go to the best schools and have the best teachers. I probably don't need to do much to convince you that it's imperative to think of every student like he or she is your important child. Every early childhood educator begins to build the foundation of learning and love in their students that will last a lifetime. Don't underestimate your role in students' lifelong school success. At Willow Grove, staff brought photos of their most important child and posted them in the staff lounge under the heading "Is It Good Enough for Them?" as a daily reminder that *all* students are important.

About This Book

The focus of this book is to outline the major concepts of PLCs and to make it clear how educators of young children can apply and use these concepts in early childhood settings in order to fully integrate with the whole-school or whole-district PLC. Many of the ideas and tools may already be in place in your school, but you may not be using them. You may be meeting and discussing issues with your colleagues together as a team, but you may not be focusing on the *right things*—the things that will make a difference in a student's education at its very early stages.

This book provides clarity on the key ideas and concepts that are the building blocks of PLCs. It shares supportive ideas for teachers and staff who work with the youngest learners—those students in kindergarten, early childhood special education programs, preK programs, birth-to-three programs, and Head Start (<https://acf.hhs.gov/ohs>). It asserts that teachers of young children are critical participants in a school's journey to becoming a PLC, a place that ensures that all students learn at high levels. It also confirms the important place that early childhood programs have in a schoolwide or districtwide PLC.

This book illustrates how to face the challenges of PLC implementation and how to use the tools and processes of a PLC to move forward. My aim is to give direction and meaning to the PLC process for early educators while providing answers to questions about the practice. I share methodologies, approaches, techniques, and procedures useful to early educators adopting and engaging in the PLC process.

The chapters in this book focus on how teachers of children in early childhood programs fit into and function in their school- or districtwide PLC. Chapter 1 discusses the importance of high-quality early childhood programs and what

successful schools and programs have done. Chapter 2 illustrates the building blocks of a PLC and how they fit into early childhood programs. I discuss the four critical questions that drive the work of a PLC and the three big ideas that inform them. Chapter 2 also defines the need for a strong mission, an enduring vision, powerful value statements that are mindful of early childhood, and challenging but attainable goals to drive progress. Chapter 3 explains the different types of teams that early childhood educators need to participate in. This chapter sheds light on what these teams do when they meet and the importance of making sure everyone hears the *early childhood voice*. I provide examples of tools that teams can use to streamline their meetings and put their time to good use. Most of these tools were originally designed for traditional K–12 PLCs, and I include them here with no revisions; the principles that guide PLCs are as applicable to early childhood classrooms as they are to upper-level classrooms. Chapter 4 explains the necessary shift in mindset from teaching to learning and goes into how to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum by identifying essential standards. It addresses the first of the four critical questions: What do we want students to know and be able to do? It includes a protocol that illustrates the steps in a process for determining early childhood essential standards. It also discusses how to pace the curriculum to ensure that all standards are taught and assessed and that students are learning the essential standards. Chapter 5 addresses the second critical question (How do we know they are learning it?) about assessments and what they look like for preK students. It details the importance of appropriate assessments and gives some ideas on how to administer them. Finally, chapter 6 discusses data and what to do with them. This chapter explains how to use data to determine student learning and to better your own teaching skills. It offers a protocol with specific steps for data analysis. Lastly, this chapter looks at the third and fourth critical questions (What do we do when they have not learned it? What do we do when they have already learned it?). I touch on response to intervention (RTI) and what the similarities and differences are between RTI at the early childhood level and in K–12. Also, I focus on how to provide enrichment for those students who have already achieved learning targets.

In your PLC journey, you become committed to the outcome that *all* students learn and achieve at the highest levels. Believe it or not, the practices of a PLC infuse every single aspect of a school's operation. Whether you are new to the PLC process or used to schools that operate as PLCs, you will see that the PLC process makes everything look different than before. Teachers no longer go into their classrooms, close the door, and teach. They focus on student learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement for all stakeholders from the youngest to the oldest, from the gifted to the disabled. The educators who form the PLC share a belief that student learning is the glue that holds the team together.