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Introduction

It seems as if every other day there is a new innovative school featured in the news. Each time the report showcases unique or even daring learning environments, stunning learning results, highly engaged learners and inspired educators. The more we hear about these schools, the more we wonder, “What makes them so noteworthy? Are they really successful? Do they have a secret sauce that we should try? Or, are they just one-off wonders due to their unique locations or the type of students they serve? Could it even be that the whole trend toward innovation is smoke and mirrors or another fad – the illusion of new-found relevance and success without any sound or reliable substance that can ultimately last?”

Between August 2014 and December 2017, we visited hundreds of schools in our collective experience as speakers, leaders and learners. More than one hundred of these visits were to the most forward-thinking, progressive and innovative schools across four continents. The goal? To come to a deeper understanding of what high-performing schools have in common, what is truly working and what is not. Our travels have taken us to public and charter schools, independent and international schools, schools serving affluent communities and schools serving some of the poorest communities in the world. One of the most evident and humbling observations we made was that teachers and schools around the world earnestly want what is best for the students they serve. Teachers from every corner of the globe care for their students and want to do everything in their power to equip them, at a minimum, to live happy, fulfilling lives of positive contribution to society.

As we were visiting these schools, we realised there is no secret for successful innovation. In fact, some of the schools, while very innovative, did not produce high levels of learning. But the schools that stood out had some clear commonalities. Those commonalities weren't exorbitant funding, or world-class facilities, or a distinct calibre of

student. It became clear that the most successful schools had deliberate systems and structures to ensure that each student attained high levels of learning. We identified three clear elements that are common among the schools that are both progressive in design and excellent in outcome.

1. These schools have all the characteristics of high-functioning PLCs, even if they do not use that nomenclature.
2. They focus on essential disciplinary knowledge; incorporate transdisciplinary, future-ready skills; and cultivate student-agency behaviours.
3. They teach students how to personalise their learning process.

The highly effective and learning-progressive schools we observed had a well-articulated guaranteed and viable curriculum composed of both critical disciplinary and transdisciplinary skills. The teachers took collective responsibility for student learning, actively collaborated, used laser-focused learning outcomes, established common expectations for learning and provided timely feedback. They also acted on the information from formative assessments to differentiate learning through intervention and acceleration strategies. In other words, knowingly or unknowingly, the most successful forward-thinking schools used PLC strategies with response to intervention (RTI) constructs (or recognisable facsimiles) as their core framework for innovation.

Finally, these schools developed mutual partnerships with students in the learning process. They cultivated intrinsic motivation, something that empowered students to own their learning. The most successful highly effective and learning-progressive schools honoured their students' unique attributes, developed positive relationships focused on students' strengths and passions, provided personalised learning structures and empowered students to drive their learning. To a large degree, the students had a voice in what they learned, in plotting their plans toward learning outcomes, and in deciding how to demonstrate their proficiency. While teachers and students had different roles, the students in the most effective learning-progressive schools were equal partners in the learning journey. Importantly, these schools did not mistake student empowerment as a way to diminish the staff's responsibility in ensuring every student's success. Instead, the staff's collaborative efforts and systems of intervention provided the supports – and safety nets – students need to take risks, make mistakes and ultimately succeed. It is evident that these schools took their commitment to creating lifelong learners very seriously.

As we reflected on these commonalities, we began to wonder how we could translate these attributes to action steps to help more schools. What is the difference between PLC schools that attain great success in the guaranteed and viable curriculum and the

highly effective and learning-progressive schools we observed? The difference, we concluded, is the active involvement and partnership of the students in the PLC process. To go from being highly effective to being highly effective and transformative requires more than teachers strategising about student learning through the PLC process; students need to be engaged in the PLC process themselves. Students must own their learning by asking and answering for themselves the four critical questions of a PLC (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many & Mattos, 2016). Table I.1 shows the application of the four critical questions to students.

TABLE I.1: The Four Critical Questions of a PLC for Students

Four Critical Questions of a PLC	Modification for Students
1. What do we want all students to know and be able to do?	1. What do I want to know, understand and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they learn it?	2. How will I demonstrate that I have learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?	3. What will I do when I am not learning?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?	4. What will I do when I have already learned it?

About This Book

This book presents a clear and concise case for transforming the current educational paradigm in order to future-proof students. We demonstrate how PLC schools can take the next step in the journey: to become highly effective and learning-progressive (innovative) PLC schools in which students experience student agency, mastering the guaranteed and viable curriculum while personalising their learning and cultivating the skills and dispositions to become future-ready, lifelong learners.

If your school is just exploring the impact that PLCs can have on student learning, this book will give you a brief yet thorough overview of PLCs and their undeniable impact. If your school is already a PLC and you are wondering whether the PLC construct has relevance for the 21st century learner, this book will affirm that you are on the right path and give you concrete strategies about how to use this research-based and time-tested approach to help reach even higher levels of engagement and learning for all students.

This book is divided into four parts. Part I, “Making the Case for Change”, chapters 1, 2 and 3, describes the changing educational paradigm, defines what it means to be highly effective and learning progressive, and introduces the elements of these

innovative schools. We then explore the concepts of personalised learning and student agency through the PLC framework in part II, “Adapting the Four Critical Questions”. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 give a structure for a thoughtful release of each PLC critical question for students based on desired learning outcomes. In part III, “Putting Theory Into Practice”, chapters 7, 8 and 9 give examples of how primary, middle and high schools around the world are putting theory into practice. In part IV, “Committing to Change”, chapter 10 introduces a successful change process in a highly respected school that has gone through the transformation to the next level of learning as a highly effective and learning-progressive school.

Inquiry and Reflection

Since we are theorists and practitioners who believe in the power of collective inquiry, we want to help you begin your own inquiry process. At the end of many chapters, we include a synthesis of key insights – Tips for Transformation – that allow you to personalise your own learning pathway. In the Rate Your Progression sections, you will measure your progress or your school’s progress toward becoming a highly effective and learning-progressive school. These features offer some additional structure and provocation for your learning journey. We also feature Questions to Consider in each chapter for further reflection. These questions are conversation starters for your collaborative teams within your PLC. If you are reading the book independently, we recommend that you process your answers to these questions with a trusted colleague in your school or region, starting a dialogue that will lead you forward.

We have structured these Questions to Consider around the four critical questions of a PLC. They focus on four main areas.

1. **The learning:** What are the important learnings for me in this chapter? For my school? What am I inspired to know and be able to do?
2. **The evidence:** What are we already doing that aligns with this paradigm? What would change in my school and professional experience if we further embrace and implement it?
3. **The learning pit:** What obstacles would we face if we were to try or to further this approach? What strategies could we use to experience breakthroughs?
4. **The lever:** What would we need to accelerate the change process?

These are great questions for students to ask as part of their learning process, so we encourage you to apply them in your instructional work with students.

Our hope is that this book will be a useful tool for all PLC schools that are ready to deepen their understanding and implementation of PLCs by welcoming students into the PLC conversation and empowering them to truly own and personalise their learning. Additionally, this book serves as a useful guide for learning-progressive schools aspiring to become highly effective, ensuring that all students learn at high levels with measurable results. We hope this book will serve as a resource that you can go back to regardless of where your school finds itself on the journey. If you are wondering where you are on the journey, begin by asking yourself critical question 1: “What is it that you really want your students to know and be able to do?” Then, ask yourself if your school provides the learning experiences necessary for your students to learn that and obtain the skills necessary to be successful participants in, and active contributors to, this ever-changing world.