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Introductory Comments: Where Are We Now?

The school-based principal's role remains highly influential in the development of pedagogical practices and the equitable improvement of student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020). Core competencies, adapted to context-specific opportunities and challenges, allow school-based principals to address complexity. As a former school-based principal, I can attest to the fact that the role can be quite isolating and lonely at times. However, I learned through my own job-embedded experience and doctoral research that the mobilization of well-structured collaborative processes served to build community, improve pedagogical and leadership practices, deepen individual and collective professional learning, engage in evidence-informed collaborative leadership and learning, and enhance student achievement. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can provide the necessary structure for intentional change leadership and school improvement. The purpose of this paper is to review Bouchamma et al.'s (2020) well-researched and deeply considered reference manual *Professional Learning Communities: Competency Standards for School Principals.*

Summary Overview of Research Manual

The manual is organized into two major parts: (1) Theoretical Context; and (2) Professional Skills Required to Implement and Sustain PLCs. Part one is divided into two chapters: (1) The Professional Learning Community; and (2) Competence.

Part one, Theoretical Context, is divided into two chapters. What has been described as the three big ideas of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2005), ensuring that all students learn, promoting a culture of collaboration, and focusing on the results, provide the foundation for what follows in chapter one. The essence of PLCs is to mobilize collaborative processes within schools in order to engage in professional learning and leadership conversations aimed at improving pedagogical practices and student achievement. A balanced critique of PLCs as a tool (i.e., benefits and hindrances) follows. Halbert and Kaser (2022) remind us of the foundational importance of understanding why (theory) and how (practice) new learning is required for leading sustainable change in practice, especially as it relates to equity and Indigenous epistemologies. Theory informs practice and practice informs theory throughout continuous and reciprocal processes. The authors exemplify this understanding by explaining a research-based synthesis of characteristics of PLCs: evidence-informed pedagogical practices; individual and collective reflective practices; sharing knowledge and supporting people; promoting educator emancipation; and mobilizing context-specific collaborative processes that build individual efficacy and capacity, collective efficacy, and capacity; strengthening school vision; accountability; and improving student achievement. The individual and collective learning of school communities is greatly enhanced when school-based principals connect theory with practice within the PLC structure, contributing to sustainable school improvement (Stoll et al., 2006). Moreover, leadership succession and PLC sustainability may be facilitated as the

school deepens its shared commitment to learning. Hipp et al. (2008) assert that the successful implementation of a PLC must be intentional, patient, relational, and school-specific; specifically, while two schools may draw from the same set of research-informed characteristics of PLCs, each may leverage and prioritize a different subset of these characteristics. Chapter one ends with a discussion of the stages of PLC development: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization (i.e., professional satisfaction, viability, and synergy). School-based principals and teams would need to decide how inquiry cycles would be integrated within the PLC structure for further refinement.

Chapter two begins by defining competence as "a complex knowledge base that is used in a professional context" (p. 17). The term complex understands that problems addressed can be resolved. The authors disaggregate competencies into four orders of professional skills and further disaggregate them into six transversal skills which are then divided disaggregated into subskills. The four professional skills are human resources management, pedagogical management, data management, and administrative management. The transversal, or core, skills are communication, cooperation, ethics, emotional intelligence, method, and leadership. The authors capture significant complexity in a manner that does not allow potential readers to get lost in the complexity. Although research-informed, through a lens of balanced critique, readers may identify other skills that are missing from those identified. For example, leading a PLC would look different if the principal was working with transformational leadership compared to a colleague working with transformative leadership compared to another colleague leading with Indigenous leadership approaches. This same comment applies whether context-specific worldviews are Western or non-Western, Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

Part two, Professional Skills Required to Implement and Sustain PLCs, is introduced with a table organized by the four orders of professional skills, disaggregated by core skills and subskills, with an emphasis on human resource management and pedagogical management emphasized. The table's structure provides principals with an inventory of skills and subskills to build professional growth plans and school improvement plans. Each professional skill is divided into essential skills which are further divided into subskills. For example, the professional skill of human resources management is divided into three essential skills which are further divided into 17 subskills. Each subskill is then examined in detail following the same sequence of content discussion beginning with dominant (e.g. leadership) and secondary (e.g., communication, cooperation) transversal skills being identified. A significant strength of this reference manual is its commitment to integrating scholarship-informed practice (i.e., what the literature says) with job-embedded experiences (i.e., what principals say). Therefore, leadership actions are both research-informed and experience-embedded. Actions to undertake recommendations and subskill-specific exercises to address each subskill (e.g., template for evaluating the climate in the PLC) are provided. Additional templates are included as appendices. Regardless of where school-based principals are along the PLC implementation continuum, or along the scholar-practitioner continuum, Bouchamma et al. (2020) provide a solid foundation.

Strengths

Bouchamma et al.'s (2020) *Professional Learning Communities: Competency Standards for School Principals* provides a comprehensive set of competencies essential to the leading and learning successes of school-based principals. Three strengths are highlighted below.

First, the resource manual is well-researched and deeply considered. It belongs in the professional libraries of school-based principals alongside the seminal works of Senge (1990), Wenger et al. (2002), and DuFour et al. (2005). Its content provides a good balance of historical and recent literature. Moreover, its content integrates research-specific wisdom with job-embedded reflections. Of particular note is its emphasis on the role school-based principals play in establishing cultures of collaboration and/or norms of collaboration so essential to sustainable school improvement and leadership succession. The foundational building blocks of collaboration (Griffiths et al., 2019) are aligned with the three big ideas of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2005).

Second, competencies are clearly articulated and operational definitions of key terms, informed by research literature, are provided. Such conceptual clarity allows PLCs to do the work of school improvement with greater precision. Katz et al. (2018) stress the importance of precision when engaging in professional learning conversations and identifying the next best learning moves. In many ways, PLCs

exemplify the essence of collaborative learning and leading processes to continuous improvement.

Third, the authors understand the context-specific reality of the learning and leading imperatives of school-based principals. PLCs take several forms and are adaptable to different contexts. Principals can select specific competencies that meet immediate professional growth and PLC priorities. As the work of PLCs progress, principals may be required to emphasize a different combination of competencies.

Suggestions for Learning Forward

Competency standards clearly delineate what is required to enhance professional practice (Van Melle et al., 2019). PLCs provide a structure that fosters iterative and reciprocal learning, both individual and collective, towards explicitly stated equity, justice, and /or decolonization goals. Since the implementation of PLCs is context-specific, these goals can be intentionally prioritized by school-based principals. I recommend three areas for learning forward.

First, school-based principals must arrive at their PLC leadership with a clear sense of themselves as both leaders and learners. What are their moral imperatives? What are their leadership approaches? What theories underpin their leadership practices? Who are they as learners? For example, transformational leadership is different than transformative leadership. Different theories underpin different leadership practices. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) stressed the importance of faculty trust in the principal as foundational to successful schools. Trust is predicated on the principal's deeds aligning with the principal's actions. Consequently, the expression of transformative intentions must align with transformative, not transformational, deeds. Twyford and Le Fevre (2019) explain the importance of principal leadership to professional learning. PLCs provide a structure that school-based principals can utilize to enhance ongoing and continuous learning.

Second, pedagogical management requires a deepening competency-based commitment to understanding cultural responsiveness; specifically, equity justice and decolonization concerns implicitly addressed by competencies should be made explicit. For example, Khalifa et al. (2016) identified culturally responsive school leadership as an under-researched leadership approach. Khalifa et al. (2018) extended this research thread in their research on Indigenous, decolonizing school leadership. An intentional and focused competency on Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies is missing. Embedding Chrona's (2022) *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies* within PLC deliberations would help to honor the reconciliation through understanding learning and leading imperatives documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

Third, data management, including evidence-informed collaborative leadership and learning, within PLCs needs to be more widely considered as a competency to allow for non-Western ways of knowing to influence equitable school improvement and student achievement. For example, Quinless (2022) and Wright et al. (2019) explained the two-eyed seeing approach where Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews were incorporated into professional learning initiatives. PLCs that honor the integration of these worldviews are intentional in improving the achievement of Indigenous students. Safir and Dugan's (2021) work on street data, described as a decolonizing form of knowledge that honors Indigenous, Afrocentric, and other non-Western ways of knowing, aligns with the need for the implementation of PLCs to be context specific.

Concluding Comments: Where Are We Next?

School-based leadership is complex and context-specific but manageable. School-based principals must honor the communities that they serve, district-specific strategic initiatives, and provincial policies in a manner consistent with context-specifics standards of practice and ethical standards. Highly competent principals are required to lead schools, foster collaborative culture, mobilize collaborative practices, engage in evidence-informed collaborative leadership and learning, engage in principles-informed collaborative leadership and learning, and enhance student success. Intentional, context-specific responses to the three learning forward recommendations relating to school-based leaders' pedagogical management and data management can be incorporated into existing PLCs.

Bouchamma et al.'s (2020) *Professional Learning Communities: Competency Standards for School Principals* is so much more than a resource manual. As a former school-based principal, this work represents an incredibly valuable resource for leadership capacity-building programs and initiatives for

both aspiring and experienced school-based leaders. As a scholarly practitioner, this work represents an incredibly valuable resource for emerging and experienced scholarly practitioners and graduate students. Although aimed toward school-based principals, this reference manual would be of great value to system-level leaders and/or professional organizations tasked with building capacity, and scholarly practitioners engaged in organizational and/or school improvement planning.

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