A Critical Look at Social Capital Theory: A Professional Learning Community’s Experience

By
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the dynamics of a group of teachers as they collaborate over a two-year period to understand Kieran Egan’s theory of Imagination and Learning and to apply the theory to their practices. The analysis begins with Coleman’s (1987, 1988, 1990) social capital theory and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) essential elements of communities of practice. In the second year of the process, however, social capital theory was inadequate in effectively analyzing the group’s complex social dynamics and Weick’s (1995) sensemaking was used to further support the study’s analysis. The findings will highlight group practices that support and threaten the stability of the group, and it will also explore specific factors, such as the role of members’ emotions, that can de-stabilize group work. The study will also examine the reasons why social capital theory was inadequate in effectively analyzing the group’s social dynamics. It will then suggest some changes to the theory so that it can more effectively represent the group’s complex interactions and their adopted practice.

The Problem

Human beings create meaning from social interaction. As Blumer (1969, p. 12) states: “The meaning of anything and everything has to be formed, learned, and transmitted through … a social process”. It is not surprising, then, that teachers’ individual classroom practices are heavily influenced by the values and beliefs of their colleagues, both past and present. Hargreaves (1994) explains that these relationships
between teachers create an environment that either strengthens or weakens an individual teacher’s commitment to professional development and ultimately influences the quality of classroom teaching. In fact, he argues that the relationships that are created among teachers and their colleagues are the most “educationally significant” in their professional lives. Yet, is sharing ideas, providing support, and fostering collegial contact enough to understand how professional learning communities develop?

Collaboration

Patterns of interaction imply that teachers collaborate. What, then, is collaboration? Belinsky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) describe a “connected knowing” that can result from a developed relationship of reciprocity between teachers. Hargreaves (1994) adds that collaboration is the process that helps extend teachers’ thinking beyond personal reflection so that they can develop a shared expertise by working together to “make sense” of relevant educational issues. And so, what makes a working relationship collaborative and why is this of value? Little (1990) explains that inquiry into teachers’ beliefs, ideas, and intentions and the degree to which they support the “intellectual, emotional, and social” needs of students is generally at the “heart” of teachers’ collegial dialogue. With an increase in the depth of interactions, along with its inherent potential for conflict, teachers are more likely to move away from practices dominated by personal prerogative and freedom from critical reflection to ones that reflect both individual personality and a collective commitment to professional development.

Elements of a Professional Learning Community

How, then, does this type of professional development occur? Dufour (2004) explains that collaborative work is fundamental to the concept of professional learning
communities that foster the development of teachers’ capabilities that enhance student learning (Hargreaves, 2001). This kind of learning community is described as “a … group of people who share a common interest in a topic or area, a particular form of discourse about their phenomena, tools and sense-making approaches for building collaborative knowledge, and value activities” (Fulton & Riel, 1999, p. 1). Wenger et al. (2002) argue that there are three essential elements to a professional learning community (also known as a community of practice): community, practice, and domain. The element of community, for example, relates to the nature of the relationships between group members and whether the “social fabric of learning” within the group is based on trusting relations that foster honest interactions, challenging questions, critical feedback, and candid admissions. The element of practice is deeply embedded in the development of the group’s community because over time, members form close relationships and develop particular ways of engaging each other in learning that is not easily adopted or even understood by people outside the particular group. Explicit tools, such as images, symbols, and procedures, and tacit knowledge in such forms as understated cues, underlying assumptions, and unspoken “rules of thumb” are integral parts of a group’s practice that reflect members’ common approaches and standards. Finally, the element of domain (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) is the “raison d’etre” why people have come together. A group’s domain that may involve such topics as designing aircraft wings, studying cross-country cycling techniques, or learning a new educational theory is the common ground that guides the community’s inquiry.
Development of a Professional Learning Community’s Elements

It is clear that when group members care about learning their chosen domain, they need to establish a common practice that will ultimately shape the nature of their community. How this is effectively done, however, is less evident. Professional sharing generally implies a fair and reciprocal exchange of insights between members. Yet, in reality, group dynamics may be dominated by members who, unwilling to critically examine their own teaching practice, choose to share very little with their colleagues other than friendly support. In fact, collaboration within schools is usually described within the context of “socioemotional support” or “generosity of spirit” and is rarely described within the realm of respectful, yet “hard-nosed deliberations” related to issues of professional practice. Furthermore, when teachers’ deeply held beliefs regarding their professional practice are critically challenged, either directly or indirectly, the potential for conflict arises. Although a moderate amount of conflict is a natural part of the growth of an effective professional learning community, it is a serious concern for most teachers. Why? Hargreaves (2001) explains that most teachers perceive collaboration as “thinking alike”, “being on the same wavelength”, and remaining “friendly to colleagues”. When collegial tension surfaces, teachers often describe themselves as feeling “devastated”, “angry”, and “personally attacked”, and they tend to avoid any further uncomfortable dialogue by engaging in “superficial politeness”. As Mandzuk (1999) notes, group dynamics can make collaborative work unsatisfying; some teachers feel threatened by the questioning of their ideas while others often feel frustrated by the lack of critical stance adopted during group discussions.
The Study’s Research Questions

Based on the questions surrounding collaboration, this study is guided by the following question: What is the practice of a professional learning community of teachers as they collaborate to understand, develop, and implement the group’s chosen domain to their individual teaching? This question arose when a group of teachers from Ecole Belair School, a moderately-sized Middle Years school in suburban Winnipeg, decided to develop the imaginative component of their teaching by implementing Kieran Egan’s theory of Imagination and Learning to their practice over a two-year period. Briefly, Kieran Egan’s (1992, 1997, 2005) theory of Imagination and Learning that is grounded in L. S. Vygotsky’s (1987) work argues that there are innovative ways in which the imaginative capacities of both teachers and students can be further engaged in order to enhance learning. Arising from the question posed above are the following research questions: (a) What factors within the professional learning community enhance or hinder collaboration among group members? (b) How do members adapt to the competing and changing expectations within the group? (c) How does the professional learning community’s practice support the development of members’ unique understanding and application of Egan’s theory to their respective Middle Years practice? and (d) What professional capabilities do members develop as a result of the group’s collaborative efforts and how valuable is the group experience in creating these outcomes? The theoretical framework used to study these questions involves the widely-used social capital theory (Coleman, 1987, 1988, 1990) that will now be explored.
The Initial Framework

Social capital theory combines the economic principle of deliberated and considered human action with the sociological perspective of predominantly inherited and assumed social expectations and actions. In effect, what Coleman (1990) did was to include what they felt was missing from the sociological perspective – the component of people’s deliberated and considered choices in society. The modified sociological perspective which, then, recognizes that people can “make choices” (and that not everything is inherited…) acknowledges that people working with each other can create a force (Bourdieu (1986) refers to it as a “social energy”) that can create value. Social capital, then, is described as the resources created through social interactions (Lin, 2002). Value is created when people collectively share individual resources in the development of a group’s community and practice. In the end, social capital theory provides a theoretical framework for studying certain forms of value created from collaborative work.

Forms of Capital

And so, what value or “social energy” is created from the sharing of resources? Coleman’s (1988) four forms of capital created through collaboration reflect the two essential elements of community and practice (Wenger et al., 2002), but in more specific forms that include: (a) trustworthiness, expectations and obligations, (b) norms and sanctions, (c) authority relations, and (d) information channels.

Trustworthiness, obligations, and expectations. In time, group members develop a common practice that ultimately leads to the achievement of the group’s goals, which reflect members’ shared expectations of the collaborative experience. Coleman (1990)
explains, however, that any relation that involves time asymmetry, where the attainment of the goals requires that members fulfill the shared expectations adopted by the group over a prolonged period of time, involves “risk”. Members, then, must trust, at least to some degree, that others in the community will fulfill their obligations to the group in order to attain the established goals.

Norms and sanctions. Social norms can reinforce trust within a community since they purposely dictate what actions group members should adopt in their practice to achieve their goals. The existence of a group norm, then, is most greatly influenced by the number of individuals who actually observe the norms, which is self-evidently true. These norm, however, need to be periodically reinforced with sanctions otherwise the direction of the group’s practice would reflect the interests of a few or even a single member. Coleman (1990) explains that in groups with strong social relations, sanctions often involve “restrictions of exchange” with offending members. For example, the sharing of resources or the interactions involving offending members may be limited for a period of time.

Authority relations. Fukuyama (1999) explains that social capital can be created in groups that are hierarchical and highly centralized in structure, as well as groups that are more informal and “decentralized” in nature. Group members, believing that it may be in their best interests to do so, may decide to give up the right to control some personal actions within a group. Why? It may be because members believe that the exercise of authority by another person will create value or that acting alone is too costly. Furthermore, the actions implemented by the individuals in authority may be considered as effective at achieving the established goals as the person’s own actions would be.
Regardless, the decision to vest authority in certain group members significantly shapes the group’s community and practice.

*Information channels.* Social structures are comprised of people with diverse experiences regarding norms, values, and expectations who become members of a group partly with the intention of developing enough of an understanding of each other so that a predictable and stable working community can be created. In fact, it is through the development of members’ controlled interaction patterns that “consensually shared perceptions and definitions” (Pfeffer, 1981) are established that enable a stable and predictable learning environment to exist.

Coleman’s (1988) four forms of capital, however, reflect only two of Wenger et al.’s (2002) essential elements of collaboration, namely community and practice; the element of domain is not represented in social capital theory. Even Coleman’s (1988) “information channels” refer more to the source of the information than the nature of the information being shared. Yet, this study argues that the group’s chosen domain significantly shapes its community and practice by determining “Who does what?” and “”What needs to be done?” For this reason, the Ecole Belair School group’s domain that is Egan’s (1992, 1997, 2005) theory of Imagination and Learning needs to be considered in the analysis of the group’s collaborative experience.

The Sample

Collaborative work reflects the unique nature of the group’s community and its chosen domain, as is the case with this study’s professional learning community. Yet, how did the group come to be? In 2003, Kieran Egan and the “Imaginative Education Research Group” (IERG) at Simon Fraser University applied for SSHRC funding in order
to systematically implement his theory of Imagination and Learning in schools across Canada, one of which was Ecole Belair School in Winnipeg. Although this research failed to materialize, a group of seven teachers decided to study and to apply Egan’s theory to their teaching practice over a two-year period, independent of the SSHRC proposal. I, then, began to study the group’s collaborative experience as part of my Master’s program at the University of Manitoba.

This non-probability sample that included me as the researcher consisted of one Grade Six teacher, three Grade Seven teachers, and one Grade Eight teacher from the English program, one Grade Seven teacher from the French Immersion program, and the principal of the school. The group consisting of five females and two males ranged in teaching experience from less than one year to twenty years of experience.

The Professional Learning Community’s Goals

Of course, the group’s goals relate to its chosen domain that is Egan’s (1992, 1997, 2005) theory of Imagination and Learning. Thus, the purpose of Ecole Belair School’s professional learning community was to: (a) come to an understanding of Egan’s theory, (b) collectively develop strategies to integrate the main ideas of Egan’s theory to the Middle Years curriculum, and (c) apply these strategies to members’ respective practices. Ultimately, the changes in the group’s teaching practices were intended to enhance the quality of teaching and learning for all Middle Years students involved in the experience.

Research Stages and Instruments

During the planning stage (October 2003 - July 2004), group meetings were once or twice monthly, either in the evenings or during “educational leave days” generously granted by the school division. During the implementation stage (September 2004 - June
2005), subjects continued to meet regularly to develop the group’s community and practice and to further develop their understanding and application of Egan’s theory.

Throughout the two-year collaborative process, three methods of data collection were used in the study. During the planning stage, the subjects’ journal entries and their participation in a focus group discussion provided members with the opportunity to reflect on their understanding and implementation of Egan’s theory and the group’s collaborative efforts. During the implementation stage, the subjects’ journal entries, their participation in two focus group discussions, and individual interviews provided members with further opportunities to reflect on the study and implementation of the group’s domain, as well the group’s social dynamics. Overall, the process required approximately 250 to 300 hours of each group member’s time.

Conclusions

In the end, this study analyzed the two-year collaborative process of a group of seven teachers as they worked to understand and implement Egan’s theory of Imagination and Learning (1992, 1997, 2005) to their Middle Years practice. The researcher began the study with the intention of only using Coleman’s (1987, 1988, 1990) social capital theory to analyze the group’s dynamics. However, the data collected quickly indicated that the group’s chosen domain, which is the element missing in the study’s initial framework, was playing a significant role in shaping the group’s social structure. It, then, became clear that social capital theory would not be sufficient for understanding the group’s evolving dynamics. For this reason, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) three essential elements of a professional learning community, namely community, practice, and domain were integrated into the social capital framework.
In the first year, Coleman’s (1990) four forms of capital provided important insight into the development of the structural components that needed to be in place for members to collaborate. It was less helpful, however, in identifying factors that hindered collaboration. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that the theory inadequately represented the group’s adopted practice, which was a source of tension in the group’s second year. For this reason, Karl Weick’s (1995) sensemaking was integrated into this study’s analysis. Weick’s (1995) theory provided group members with valuable information regarding the overriding importance of members’ expectations in shaping the collaborative process and how competing expectations, and their related emotions, influenced the process. By integrating Weick’s (1995) sensemaking, the study’s framework still reflected the structural perspective found in Coleman’s (1987, 1988, 1990) four types of capital, but it now also represented how different factors interrelated to enhance or hinder collaboration.

*Integrating Sensemaking*

Weick’s (1995) sensemaking addressed some important questions relating to the Ecole Belair School group collaborative experience. For example, why did members of the group experience challenging times working with each other? Coleman (1990) suggests that norms provide stability because they purposely dictate what actions are considered acceptable by members in achieving their collective goals. However, as individual member’s expectations begin to deviate from the established norms, the group’s learning environment becomes less predictable. For example, when a member’s expectations challenged the group’s norms of completing assigned readings or allowing equal voice among members, significant time and energy was invested by other members
in attempting to re-establish the norms and to increase group stability. In the second year of the study, most members stated that they regularly questioned the need to either tolerate distracting behaviour associated with competing expectations or intervene with sanctions.

So, why was there more tension between group members throughout the second year? Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking suggests that people filter and prioritize different environmental stimuli, based on personal needs and goals, so that they are not overwhelmed by constantly changing information. This filtered information is, then, made more meaningful to individuals by connecting it to their prior knowledge. However, when emotions surface because members’ expectations are interrupted, sensemaking is constrained because negative emotions encourage recall and retrospection of earlier experiences that hold the same emotional tone (Snyder and White, 1982). For example, anger at being interrupted will promote the recall of past experiences where feelings of anger were prevalent. This has important implications for the sensemaking process because once strong emotions become involved, past experiences are no longer being recalled because they are observed as similar, but because they are now also being “felt” as similar.

And so, why did emotions become a challenge only in the second year of the Ecole Belair School group’s collaborative process? Over time, as group members come to expect certain behaviour within the group, opportunities for interruption become more plentiful. Therefore, once expectations become established in the form of norms, such as with the group’s collective assigning of readings or agreed upon agenda, negative emotions can easily occur from the interruption of the norms. On the other hand, positive
emotions can only occur if unexpected actions further facilitate the achievement of the group’s goals. Significant positive emotions, then, cannot generally be created from consistently generating the “expected behaviour” within a group.

In the end, what was actually accomplished from the group’s two-year experience? Some members appeared to challenge themselves to develop their implementations throughout the two-year process, while others stopped and to some extent, “re-used” the same implementation throughout much of the second year. This became a source of frustration for some who felt that other members’ wavering commitment to the collaborative process was negatively affecting the group’s work. One member explained that by being given the time to work closely with colleagues, she was able to develop the skills necessary to successfully “team teach”. Others noted that they learned to “slow down” and to focus on the “quality of learning”, rather than on the “quantity of learning”. Furthermore, members created unique and imaginative implementations using Egan’s (1997) cognitive tools that helped to foster student engagement in their teaching practice.

What were a few of the more obvious symbolic outcomes created from the collaborative process? For some members, the knowledge altered their way of “seeing the world”. The experience initiated deep changes in the way that some of the teachers understood teaching and learning which they planned to further develop. All members stated that they understood more about the importance of imagination in human development. And for some, the process taught them more about working with people, whether that involved developing greater empathy for people as they struggled with difficult challenges, or whether it involved the development of the more practical collaborative skills necessary for effective “teaming”.
Social Capital Theory Revisited

Ecole Belair School’s collaborative experience highlights five main observations with respect to the application of social capital theory: (a) expectations is not one of four forms of capital, but rather, it is fundamental to all the components that enhance or hinder collaboration, (b) Coleman’s (1990) four forms of “capital” need to be understood as highly interrelated if they are to analyze how a group adapts to competing and changing expectations, (c) The four forms of capital need to be realigned to more effectively reflect the complexity of group dynamics, (d) The four forms of capital need to be understood beyond the context of “assets” or “gains”, but as necessary components of group work that can both enhance or hinder collaboration, and (e) The four forms of capital, however, need to more adequately represent a group’s adopted practice; social capital theory reflects only the element of community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) and is unable to more accurately represent the group’s adopted practice.

Coleman (1990) refers to the issue of expectations as only one of the four forms of capital that include norms and sanctions, authority relations, and information channels. This study suggests, however, that all other forms of “capital” need to be understood within the context of members’ expectations. The group’s norms that reflect members’ expectations purposely dictate which actions are considered effective in attaining the collective goals and which actions are threatening to the group’s collaborative efforts. In this light, the vesting of authority becomes a question of which members are most able to help the group meet the expectations of individual members. It follows, then, that the development of the group’s information channels is shaped by the alignment of members’
expectations in the form of norms and goals, and the group’s emerging authority relations.

It is now clear that Coleman’s (1987, 1988, 1990) four forms of “capital” are interrelated, but not as they are currently presented. Of course, the aligning of members’ expectations to form the group’s norms and goals is what transforms a group of people into a “community”. The stabilizing force of the group’s norms and goals unite people’s efforts; it is the common denominator in the group’s practice. Sanctions should be viewed, then, as a possible way of responding to competing expectations that threaten the group’s norms and goals; as one option that can be used in the maintenance of group stability. The issue of trust surfaces when authority is vested in a person most likely to help the group attain its goals. Trust is an integral part of authority relations; it has a more distant relation to expectations. Finally, information channels only partially reflect the issue of the group’s practice, which is integral to the group’s development of community. It addresses the source of the group’s information but not how it is being synthesized by members.

Furthermore, is it helpful to refer to Coleman’s (1988) four forms of capital as “capital” in the analysis of group work? To refer to these components of collaboration as “assets” or “gains” is to oversimplify the complexity of their role in group work. Although the aligning of members’ expectations creates norms that can foster group stability, competing expectations can also de-stabilize members’ collaborative efforts. Furthermore, proposed sanctions can enforce group norms, but they can also exacerbate pre-existing group tension. Although authority relations are an important part of collaboration, they can also generate competing expectations that can seriously
destabilize a community. Of course, information channels are integral to all these other forms of “capital” and can be used to stabilize or to de-stabilize group work.

The synthesis of information that occurred throughout the group’s two-year collaboration raises another concern; social capital theory only reflects the essential element of community and only hints at the element of the group’s practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). Issues of expectations and norms, authority relations, and even information channels adequately represent how the community is “shaping up”, but these forms of “capital” fail to capture what the group does in the form of joint action. This issue of practice is important because it then influences what information the group deems relevant, which future actions it considers appropriate, and which people are most likely to “make it happen”.

Furthermore, the interrelated nature of Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) three essential elements of community, practice, and domain implies that the group’s practice must include members’ expectations in the form of both norms and collective goals. The group’s goals, after all, are members’ expectations as they relate to their learning of their chosen domain and represent their “raison d’etre”. From this, the question must then be asked: Have the group’s goals been met? To discuss collaboration in terms of norms and goals and to ignore whether the group actually succeeded in satisfying their expectations regarding their professional practice is insufficient.

**Changes to Social Capital Theory**

And so, the analysis of the group’s collaborative efforts suggests some changes to social capital theory. The issue is not whether to accept or reject social capital theory; Coleman’s (1988) four forms of “capital” provide a valuable structural perspective for
analyzing the collaborative process. It’s a question of realigning the original conceptual framework so that it can more effectively represent the group’s efforts to sustain its stability while adapting to the de-stabilizing effects of members’ competing expectations.

In fact, members’ expectations, in the form of norms and goals, shape the group’s common practice that helps to determine what aspects of the domain will be explored and how the community will develop. For this reason, *individual expectations, norms, and group goals* need to be understood as fundamental to collaborative work. Once norms and goals have been established, the group members’ relationships, as well as their adopted practice, will emerge. It is individual expectations as both norms and group goals that initially begin, and then continue to “drive” this process.

How, then, is the collaborative process sustained over time? Group sanctions refer to the joint actions taken by members that serve to protect group expectations that become the group’s norms and goals. Sanctions can take many forms, but are consistently used to protect group stability by limiting the effect of members’ competing expectations within a social structure. As Coleman (1988) explains, members’ *competing expectations and possible sanctions* need to be understood as a way of protecting the group’s norms and goals.

But, what are members actually doing to achieve the group’s goals? This is an important question that can be only partly addressed by using Coleman’s (1990) “information channels” because it only addresses the source of group information and not how it is being synthesized. As Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, p. 14) explain: “Caring for a domain goes beyond mere interest. It entails developing a shared practice,
which directly affects the behaviours [sic] and abilities of members”. The group’s practice, as well as its channels, needs to be included in the group’s synthesis of information.

Figure 1 is a very basic representation of the suggested changes to social capital theory. Members’ expectations, norms, and group goals are at the basis of group work; they are the initial “points of contact” that are necessary for collaboration to occur. From this, the group’s synthesis of information takes place. This comprises the joint actions adopted in the ongoing development of the group’s community, practice, and domain. Throughout this process, members’ expectations change, and at times, compete with the established norms and goals of the group. Sanctions must, therefore, periodically be used to protect the group’s stability so that members can achieve their shared goals. The issue of authority relations permeates all parts of the process; members with vested authority help to shape and maintain the group’s norms and goals by guiding its practice. This is done with both institutional and personal authority. Waller (1961) explains that institutional authority is derived from the social position a person holds within an organization, whereas personal authority is generated from the personal resources, expertise, and experience of the individual. As Pfeffer (1981) argues, authority is vested in certain members of a group because they are perceived by others as being most able to help the group to achieve its goals by maintaining a broader vision of the group’s work. Taking the risk to vest authority in certain people involves trust; it needs to be understood within the context of authority relations. In short, the group’s authority relations and trustworthiness represents the risk that certain people have assumed based on the perceived trustworthiness of specific group members to “get the work done”.

Figure 1

Changes to Social Capital Theory: Creating and Maintaining Group Stability
Implications for Practice

This study’s research questions involved identifying: (a) what factors enhanced and hindered group stability, (b) how members adapted to competing expectations, (c) how the group supported members’ unique understanding of implementation of theory, and (d) the professional outcomes created as a result of the group work. To summarize, the main implications for practice include:

1. All components of collaboration, whether it involves authority relations and trust or information synthesis, have the potential to enhance or hinder group work. Once the group’s norms and goals have been established, competing expectations are eventually going to occur that will require that members use some of their resources to stabilize the learning environment. Ongoing attention should be given to the amount of resources needed to sustain the group and the level of energy left for the actual learning of the domain, especially in the second year of group work. In short, how much learning is actually taking place?

2. Demands, such as presentations, are motivational and further challenge teachers to connect the theory to their practice. Extra demands also create the hectic times that tend to destabilize group work because as certain members prioritize relevant information for decision-making, some members’ expectations are going to be ignored. The group can either focus on “meeting the demands” and de-emphasizing some members’ expectations or it can focus on addressing these expectations and neglecting some of the demands. Either way, it’s going to destabilize the group.
3. Competing expectations are inherent to the collaborative process and their existence simply means that the group must adopt strategies to cope. In fact, adapting to competing expectations really only becomes a concern when they start to deviate too much energy away from the group’s learning. This “draining” of group resources often occurs when members’ emotions become involved in the rational processes of group work and group energy is spent adapting to members’ “distracting” behaviour.

4. It is important that all members shape the group’s practice. Care needs to be taken to find the unique ways that each group member will balance the competing expectations involved in learning and applying a theory. Although a broader vision of the group’s “learning path” needs to exist, the steps in the process cannot be mandated by a few; all members need a voice in its development. If the group’s path meanders too far from any one member’s expectations, they are going to leave the group.

5. Just because a professional learning community is studying a theory does not mean that its members are making changes to their practice. The difficulty in applying a theory to practice is often underestimated; it’s probably more challenging than studying the theory alone. Explicit actions, such as the “hot seat” process, need to be adopted to ensure that members are being supported during this difficult and stressful time. Actions, such as presentations, also need to be in place to further challenge members to make the changes to practice.

6. The group’s domain needs to be chosen very carefully. Whether the topic initially brings the members together or whether it surfaces, in time, from group meetings,
the domain is going to shape how members collectively choose to learn and “who does what” in the process. The necessary time needs to be taken to ensure that the chosen domain truly reflects the group’s interest.

7. Developing a professional learning community is time-consuming and, at times, stressful, especially in the second-year of the process. It is, in fact, during this time when certain members will experience some of their most meaningful learning, while other members will lose interest in the group’s goals. The second year of the process offers incredibly valuable learning, although the needs of the group’s community can be demanding.

8. The ongoing consequences to the larger staff need to be monitored when a professional learning community exists. The group experience can create close relationships and exciting learning opportunities that can be perceived as exclusionary to other staff. Furthermore, if the collaborative work also requires release time from regular work responsibilities, more demands could be placed on colleagues that can result in staff tension.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study raise a number of questions for further research, three of which will now be explored. The first question focuses on the outcomes created by professional learning communities. What strategies, such as professional presentations, can be used to successfully challenge group members to keep aligning their attitudes and beliefs to their practice during the collaborative process? How could members be further supported in the difficult task of critically and realistically examining their own practice for evidence of their newly developed knowledge? Also, are there indicators within the
social dynamics that can help to gauge when a group is no longer being appropriately
challenged by imposed demands and when its very existence is being put “at risk”? 

The second question focuses on the evidence of learning. Although they are a
popular form of collaboration, do professional learning communities regularly promote
actual professional development? If so, how? What professional changes arise from this
process? Are the outcomes more symbolic in nature or do they impact professional
practice in a substantive way? In short, how often do children directly benefit from this
type of collaborative work?

The third question refers to the role of professional learning communities within
the present educational system. Can this type of ongoing group learning play a central
and integral role in schools’ professional development plans or are professional learning
communities seen more as peripheral to the presently established schools’ professional
development days? Are they legitimized or valued by the very organizations that
promote them? If so, how does the meaningful aligning of expectations and the
subsequent sharing of resources occur in a large staff? Are groups allowed to be “self-
selecting” based on shared expectations or are they developed centrally? Is the domain
mandated or are groups given the freedom to identify their own shared interest? In a
large staff with many groupings, how does the staffing community eventually “come
together”? In short, is there an authentic role in the present school system for
professional learning communities and the unique collaborative learning experience that
they offer?
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