

Appendix II: Professional Learning Communities Tāpiritanga II: Ngā Hapori Kaiako

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There is a substantial body of research evidence that examines the value of communities of professionals working together to improve student learning. As far back as the 1920s, John Dewey contended that schools need to be communities of inquiry into their educational practices, using data and their own contexts to examine issues that affect students' engagement with learning. Today, many researchers argue for professional learning communities²¹ that work and learn together at all levels of the educational system, collaborating to build their capacity to change and improve so that they can achieve better outcomes for their students.

What is a professional learning community?

A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all [participants'] learning.

Stoll, Bolam, McMahon et al., 2005, page 1

In education, a "professional learning community" (PLC) is the context in which people involved with and concerned about schooling work collaboratively to learn how they can improve student learning. There is no universal definition or description of a professional learning community. However, a range of researchers have attempted to identify the specific characteristics of professional learning communities that are effective in sustaining improvements in student learning. While their terminology may differ, many of the characteristics they identify and the learning principles on which they rest seem to be similar. In addition, the characteristics and principles seem to be the same whether they are applied to professional learning communities in schools, inservice teacher education, or at the government level. This appendix draws on research evidence to identify and attempt to describe some characteristics of effective professional learning communities and their implications for inservice teacher education.

²¹ Note that these materials generally use the terms "communities of practice" and, to a lesser degree, "discourse communities" rather than "professional learning communities". These terms have arisen from the work of situated learning theorists who argue that interactions with the people in one's environment are major determinants of both what is learned and how learning takes place (Putnam and Borko, 2000). You can read more about situated learning theories in Appendix I.

As you read this chapter, think about what *you* consider are the characteristics of an *effective* professional learning community. What are the learning communities to which you belong or whose learning you support? Do they display these characteristics? What is your evidence for your answers? How could the communities be made more effective? What is your role in helping to make them more effective?

The following characteristics seem to be typical of effective professional learning communities:

- commitment to learning for all;
- collaborative relationships among community members;
- shared values and vision;
- reflective and iterative inquiry;
- participation in networks and partnerships;
- commitment to sustainability and capacity building.

Commitment to learning for all

The purpose of educator professional learning communities is to ensure that students learn. We know that the quality of teaching has a significant effect on students' learning outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003). It follows that improved learning outcomes for students depend in part on a commitment to learning by their teachers and that improved professional learning for teachers depends on a commitment to learning by ISTE.

What the literature says

In education, effective professional learning communities:

- have an unremitting focus on student learning;

If ... the fundamental purpose of schooling is to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success as ongoing learners, the need for improvement is immediate and imperative. The PLC concept is grounded in this making-a-difference sense of moral purpose.

DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour, 2005, page 15

- have an equally unremitting focus on professional learning for educators;

The reason that professional learning communities are essential is that they are learning organizations They do interact to produce shared commitment and they constantly worry about what is worthwhile and how to get there. Because of their purposeful interactions, they are organically suited to converting tacit knowledge to explicit (shared, definable, learnable) knowledge on an ongoing basis. They are energy and knowledge creators – exactly what a learning organization is, and precisely what is needed to make change meaningful and substantial.

Fullan, 2001, pages 270–271

- measure the effectiveness of professional development by its contribution to educator learning and, ultimately, to student learning.

Professional development ... is a collective good rather than a private or individual good. Its value is judged by what it contributes to the individual's capacity to improve the quality of instruction in the school and school system.

Elmore, 2002, page 14

Implications for ISTE

As educational leaders, ISTE need to have a deep knowledge of pedagogical approaches that support effective learning in particular contexts and to be able to model those approaches in their own practice. This requires them to engage in ongoing learning in their own professional learning communities. It also means that the main measure of the effectiveness of professional learning should be its impact on teaching practice and student outcomes.

Collaborative relationships among community members

In professional learning communities focused on making ongoing improvements to student learning, educators need to be able to do more than share their ideas and support each other; they also need to collaborate to critically examine the impact that their ideas and practices are having on student outcomes. This means that they need to develop relationships that promote collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of shared knowledge about effective learning and teaching.

What the literature says

Collaborative professional relationships:

- break down cultures of isolation and provide opportunities for educators to learn from each other;

To be sure, high quality instruction depends upon the competence and attitudes of each individual teacher. But in addition, teachers' individual knowledge, skills and dispositions must be put to use in an organized, collective enterprise. That is, social resources must be cultivated, and the desired vision for the social resources within a school can be summarized as professional community.

King and Newmann, 2001, in Bolam, McMahon, Stoll et al., 2005, page 15

- foster reflection and inquiry around shared problems of practice, contributing to:

the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes.

Seashore et al., 2003, quoted in Bolam et al., 2005, page 6

- are based on mutual trust and respect;

Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements for this kind of culture. Teachers find help, support, and trust as a result of the development of warm relationships with each other. "Teachers tolerate (even encourage) debate, discussion and disagreement. They are comfortable sharing both their successes and their failures. They praise and recognise one another's triumphs, and offer empathy and support for each other's troubles". (Wignall, 1992)

Hord, 1997, page 4

- are based on a distributed model of leadership and expertise;

In a professional learning community, administrators are committed to sharing decision making with staff and providing opportunities for teachers to serve as leaders ... Collective decision making results in increased morale, ownership, understanding about the direction and processes of change, shared responsibility for student learning, and a sense of professionalism, all of which help to sustain improvement efforts.

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), 2003, page 1

- foster dynamic professional exchanges and learning conversations that help people to critically examine their beliefs and assumptions and to address and resolve difficult issues.

In learning conversations people recognize the importance of treating different accounts of a problem as a resource for learning better ways of thinking about and resolving it. This means they are open to learning from others about the adequacy of their assumptions, beliefs, and values.

Robinson and Lai, 2006, page 41

Implications for ISTE

ISTEs need to experience collaborative working relationships in their own learning communities, both to support their own learning and to give them experience they can draw on in developing such relationships with teachers and school leaders. For ISTE to develop collaborative relationships, they need to find ways of communicating that help all parties to better understand each other. Conversations between educators should foster positive relationships while maintaining a rigorous focus on the effect of teaching practice on learning.

In [Case 6](#), a learning conversation with a colleague enables an ISTE to resolve discrepancies between her beliefs and her practice.

See pages 120–133 and 139–140 for more discussion of collaborative learning relationships and learning conversations.

Shared values and vision

The members of an effective professional learning community negotiate a shared vision that articulates their values and goals for improvement. Their fundamental focus is on student learning.

What the literature says

The members of an effective professional learning community:

- collaborate to develop a vision that clearly articulates the community's purpose and that they try to enact in their everyday practice;

Sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is a particular mental image of what is important to the individual and to an organisation. Staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared vision, but to use that vision as a guidepost in decision-making about teaching and learning.

Hord, 1997, page 4

- periodically review their vision in light of experience;

Effective schools ... allocate resources to make certain that the vision continues to reflect the school's common values and goals for improvement. In addition, they periodically review the vision to determine if the standards it sets forth are ambitious yet attainable and if it continues to focus closely on the diverse needs of students served by the school (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002).

Quoted in McREL, 2003, page 1

- share common ways of working that they have negotiated and agreed and that reflect their values and vision.

Professional groups, engaged in critical reflection about their work, work best when all subscribe to an agreed process. These processes, their underlying assumptions, and the manner in which they are applied we generally refer to as protocols.

Stevens and Stewart, 2005

Implications for ISTEs

Quality teaching and learning in any community requires a shared vision about what is to be achieved in practice. In reflecting on this, community members may decide that they need to change their practices or that they need to revisit the vision itself. ISTEs support professional learning communities to develop the dynamic and iterative processes needed to achieve consistency between their vision and their practice. At the same time, ISTES engage with such processes in their own communities.



Reflective and iterative inquiry

The members of an effective professional learning community engage in ongoing inquiry about serious educational issues, exploring data from a wide range of sources and examining it for its value as evidence on which to make decisions for practice. This process encourages reflective thinking and leads to deepened understandings that negate the protection of the status quo.

What the literature says

An effective professional learning community:

- learns through an ongoing cyclical process of critical inquiry. Communities become “cultures of inquiry” in which investigation and evidence drive improvement;

[Toole and Seashore Louis (2002)] describe a culture of inquiry as “a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (p. 247). In their view, such collaborative communities, often referred to as “professional learning communities”, are not comfortable collaborations through which teachers merely share ideas but are opportunities for rigorous investigations of school wide teaching and learning.

Robinson and Lai, 2006, page 198

- develops the ability to learn by collaboratively deconstructing, reconstructing, and co-constructing knowledge;

[I]f the community is to be intellectually vigorous then members need a solid base of expert knowledge and skills and there needs to be a strong emphasis on the professionalisation of teachers’ work through increasing expert knowledge ... Learning within PLCs involves active deconstruction of knowledge through reflection and analysis, and its reconstruction through action in a particular context, as well as co-construction through collaborative learning with peers.

Bolam et al., 2005, page 11

- meets regularly to discuss and reflect critically on practice;

Immense value was placed on teachers’ learning for improvement in PLCs, evidenced by a dedication to regular planning times ... where teachers discussed strategies, shared ideas, planned and solved problems. Teachers responded positively to opportunities for self-analysis ... to get continuously better at doing what was best for their students’ learning ... Teachers found solutions by learning and working together towards a common goal, realising that learning and change take time and effort.

Morrissey, 2000, page 3

- invites an educator in role as, for example, a critical friend, coach, mentor, or external expert to provide another lens on practice and to help scaffold the learning.

The idea of critical friends is a powerful one because it contains an inherent tension. Friends bring a high degree of positive regard, are forgiving and are tolerant of failings. Critics are often conditional, negative, and intolerant of failure. Critical friends offer both support and critique in an open, honest appraisal (MacBeath, 1998). As Costa and Kallick (1995) describe it, a critical friend is “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work, as a friend” (p. 154).

Earl and Katz, 2002, page 1018

Implications for ISTE

ISTEs play an important role as educational leaders who help to develop cultures of inquiry in the professional learning communities with which they work. Being an educational leader means stimulating and supporting people as they examine their practice in relationship to evidence about its impact on student learning. ISTEs need to model inquiry-based learning in their own practice, while also supporting schools to gather and make sense of their data and use it to challenge their assumptions and beliefs.

In Case 3, three ISTE work together to deconstruct (through analysis of a problematic situation) and reconstruct (by role playing alternative scenarios) their understandings of effective communication.

See pages 88–90 for more discussion of cultures of inquiry.

Participation in networks and partnerships

If our goal is to provide the best possible learning opportunities for all New Zealand students, it is not enough to focus on learning within individual professional learning communities. Members of professional learning communities need to contribute to a system-wide focus on shared learning and improvement. As Fullan (2005) argues, entire systems must be actively engaged in the reform of schooling and take collective responsibility for increasing the capacity for continuous improvement in student performance.

What the literature says

Effective professional learning communities understand the need for everyone to learn together, not only within but beyond their communities.

- They seek external expertise. In their synthesis of the features of professional learning and development that have had significant outcomes for diverse students, Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) found that deep learning almost always requires the engagement of external expertise.

The need for external expertise is understandable ... because the substantive new learning involved in most core studies required teachers to learn new content and skills and to think about their existing practice in new ways. It is unlikely that any group of professionals would be able to manage this level of new learning without support and challenge from someone with expertise in the area. It is not sufficient simply to provide time and opportunity.

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- They participate in systemic networks.

A network increases the pool of ideas on which any member can draw and as one idea or practice is transferred, the inevitable process of adaptation and adjustment to different conditions is rich in potential for the practice to be incrementally improved by the recipient and then fed back to the donor in a virtuous circle of innovation and improvement. In other words, the networks extend and enlarge the communities of practice with enormous potential benefits.

Hargreaves, 2003, page 9

Implications for ISTE

Large-scale improvement requires educators at all levels of the education system to use the best knowledge and practices available in order to build their capacity to help bring about improved student learning outcomes. It follows that effective ISTE practice requires the creation of networks and partnerships with other professional learning communities in all parts of the education system to support reciprocal learning for all.

In professional communities writ large, the system as a whole adopts the agenda of fostering deep learning communities. In other words, schools and communities explicitly pursue the development of new cultures of professional learning; districts, regions, and schools establish infrastructures to support and mentor such development; and states or provinces commit themselves to policies and strategies for systemically addressing the evolution of professional learning cultures.

Fullan, 2005, page 3

In Case 1, two teachers describe the changes in their practice that have resulted from the external expertise an ISTE has brought to the school.

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See pages 159–166 and 172–173 for more discussion of system-wide improvement.

If our goal is to provide the best possible learning opportunities for all New Zealand students, members of professional learning communities need to contribute to a system-wide focus on shared learning and improvement.

Commitment to sustainability and capacity building

If the routines and culture of a professional learning community are working properly, they should provide a self-renewal mechanism for the community. That is, they should build the capacity of the community to achieve ongoing improvements in both professional and student learning.

What the literature says

Research into sustainability is still in its early stages. Bolam et al. (2005) note that because leadership succession seems to be a factor in a professional learning community's decline, much of this research is focusing on the nature of the leadership required to build capacity and sustain improvement. They cite findings from one longitudinal study:

A longitudinal study of change over time in Canada and the United States, from the perspective of staff who worked in eight secondary schools in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s suggests that sustaining change requires: sustaining deep learning; involving a broad range of people in "chains of influence"; spreading improvements beyond individual schools; it being done on existing resources, not through special projects where the funding then dries up; nourishing and taking care of people, rather than burning them out; sharing responsibility; activist engagement to secure outside support; and develop[ing] capacity that enables "people to adapt to, prosper and learn from each other in their increasingly complex environment" (Hargreaves, 2004).

pages 26–27

Timperley et al. (2007) found only seven studies that satisfied their criterion for sustainability. While there are similarities between their findings and those in the study cited above, for example, in the importance of leadership and organisational support, other key factors also seem to be the need for theoretical knowledge, inquiry skills, and the ability to self-regulate learning.

Features of professional learning and development that were associated with sustained student outcomes included a strong theoretical base that provided the foundation for principled decisions about practice, and the skills to collect relevant evidence and use it to inquire into the impact of teaching on student learning, particularly in relation to understanding students' problematic thinking or achievement.

... The evidence related to sustainability is consistent with the conditions known to promote self-regulated learning for teachers. Self-regulated learners are able to answer three questions: "Where am I going?", "How am I going?", and "Where to next?" (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Teachers with both inquiry skills and content knowledge, and who received support from their leaders, were consistently able to do this in terms of the impact of their teaching on student learning.

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Implications for ISTE

Fullan (2005) describes the kind of professional learning community that ISTE need to develop and work within in order to create sustainability. He argues that the benefit of groups outside schools establishing their own learning communities is that it gives them understanding of the change process and the corresponding capacity building that needs to be done.

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