Teachers Matter
Communities of Inquiry for Professional Learning and Development

By Mary Kooy

Recent research confirms what most of us already know: high quality teaching links to improved student learning and drives student success (Yoon et al., 2007; Wayne and Youngs, 2003). While the notion of the teacher at the center of student learning appears beyond debate, teachers themselves are often left out of the educational conversation; they remain "the most affected, and least consulted" (Kooy, 2015; Kooy and Colarusso, 2014). Although research evidence points to teachers as the lynchpins, the "final gatekeepers," shockingly little is known about their professional learning and development. Finding the causal link between teaching excellence and improved student learning requires investigating what teachers know, how they know it, and how they acquire the skills to learn and teach effectively.

Teacher Learning as Professional Development

The current and continuing force to "improve" education over the last twenty years has driven the content, testing, and accountability movements. Ironically, this is located in a context that swiftly recognized the centrality of teachers in realizing change and reform. In turn, this led to increased emphasis on teacher professional development even in "more with less" fiscal environments.

Many schools responded by upping the offerings of the conventional "one-shot" workshop (Clark, 2001) in spite of considerable research indicating little or no effect on teacher learning. It is unlikely, for instance, that administrators, school districts, or other external agencies (who find "experts" to lead the session) recognize and understand individual teacher/class needs or, for that matter, the lived realities of local schools and contexts (Clark, 2001; Fullan, 2006). The message to teachers is clear: Teachers need "fixing" and cannot be trusted to determine or act upon their professional learning needs.

Nevertheless, new approaches to teacher development did emerge. The most popularized is the Professional Learning Community model (PLC) adopted across many schools and districts. Informed by research on collaboration and social knowledge construction (Clark, 2001; Edwards, 2012; Kooy, 2012; Mowbray, 2005; Rentfro, 2005), PLCs consist of teacher groups who focus on issues directly related to their particular school. While this initially appears preferable to the "workshop," closer examination reveals that most PLCs function as top-down, mandated PD with administration determining content, process, membership, and deadlines (Vescio et al., 2008). Fullan (2006) observed that, "the term [PLC] travels faster and better than the concept" (p. 10) and its ubiquitous implementation has outpaced the research informing it. Premature and uninformed implementation results in the continuing exclusion of professional learning from the teachers' hands, effectively blocking the construction of authentic professional communities.

This powerful and compelling point resonates particularly for Christian teachers who need to rethink their place and role in education. After their many in-service training sessions, conferences, workshops, and seminars, teachers must ask: "How much different are my classrooms today than they were 10 or 15 years ago? How differently do I teach? How many of the ideas, concepts, and skills presented have actually taken deep root in my teaching?"

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Such critical questioning can lead Christian school teachers to reconsider traditional forms and roles and focus on what it would mean to be critically involved in educational processes, curriculum development, and sustained professional learning. Since Christian schools are independent (unlike public schools), they are uniquely suited to form teacher communities within school sites to participate in the educational processes that impact their teaching and learning in and beyond the classroom. Indeed, working within a Christian framework opens

avenues for collaborative professional learning that calls on teachers to act on shared values and develop interdependence. It means bending traditional expectations, moving from passive "presentations" to active networking and sustained collaborative learning. Research indicates that teacher knowledge develops with active engagement in hands-on work, particularly when such work links specifically to local curriculum and policies (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009).

For practitioners, transformative learning happens as they explore their questions, dilemmas, and concerns in sustained collaboration with others. Teachers need to experience and engage in intellectual activities for professional learning and knowledge development in communities (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009a,b; Kooy, 2009, 2012b, 2014; Little and Horn, 2007; Lytle, 2008). Until teachers engage in sustained learning—understanding how learning develops in social contexts and working to create a shift in the culture of the school—collaborative learning in the classroom will not happen. Actualizing communities of teachers is at the heart of Christian schooling. It brings to life the perspective of community building as interdependent networks for learning and teaching both within and beyond the classroom and school.

My Current Research on Teacher Learning Communities

Since 2000, I have conducted research with K–12 teachers who meet in small communities of learning (Kooy, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2015) to reconstruct their teaching through learning with others. The current longitudinal study (2011–2015) consists of 16 K–12 teachers from one Michigan and eight Ontario school districts. The research investigates *what happens to professional learning and development when teachers pose questions and generate and conduct their own research reflecting their teaching, skills, schools, classes, and contexts and maintain participation in a sustained community of teacher learners.*

Teachers met in three distinct environments: (1) an annual three-day summer institute; (2) monthly research days that included two-hour online meetings and, (3) a virtual PLC. The *annual summer institutes* allow teachers to engage in critical and collaborative inquiries on relevant issues, update their research work, examine the findings of the larger research project, and share meals. *Monthly research days* (funded by the research) provide time for teachers to pursue their local investigations (e.g. observations, reading, writing proposals) and to meet online to

learn, teach, and discuss issues related to teaching and learning. Each session is videotaped. The virtual PLC provides a space for teachers to connect with colleagues for such things as reviewing the videotaped meetings, adding or requesting additional resources or demonstrations (using Edmodo in the class, for instance), adding articles, or collaborating to prepare proposals for academic and professional conferences. This comprehensive network of support is fundamental to the research project.

TIME AND CHOICE are the most critical aspects for professional learning.

Since 2011, we have been collecting and analyzing the teacher data. Advanced research methods helped us to identify recurring and emerging themes in the data:

1. Teachers unequivocally resist the traditional one-shot workshops that are the mainstay of PD.
2. Time and choice are the most critical aspects for professional learning.
3. Teachers transitioned from group to community through sustained learning experiences: face-to-face meetings, online meetings, and the virtual PLC.
4. Membership in a teacher learning community requires active participation with mutual accountability and responsibility for sustained professional learning.
5. Teachers need time and opportunity to determine/ choose research questions and processes related to their professional needs, contexts, and curricula with support from their networked colleagues.
6. Teachers use the monthly online meetings with other professionals to network, question, support, update, and seek and provide resources.
7. Professional learning develops through cultivating relationships, connections, and questioning in social contexts.
8. Effective and sustained teacher learning has an impact on learning in classrooms and schools.
9. Integrating face-to-face with technology-mediated environments seems to support existing research for sustainability since it appears that the deeper the personal relationship between learners, the richer the collaborative learning experiences. In turn, it suggests that the relationships built may be strengthened through the group interactions using technology before and after a face-to-face meeting.

Where to Begin

Teachers are better together than as solitary "gatekeepers." This is crucial in Christian schools; though the concept of community is not unique to Christians, it resonates particularly strongly in the Christian view. Community is the thread that binds and holds Christians and their schools together. The question, then, is where to begin.

1. Before school starts: professional development days

Teachers anonymously submit a set of problems and issues that concern them in their teaching, the school, and curriculum (e.g., novice teacher, new grade/subject area, inquiry-based learning).

2. Collect the questions

Write the issues where they will be visible to all (whiteboard, available on personal computers).

3. Categorize and prioritize the questions

Define categories and post the related questions under each—this exercise can be done in small groups or individually.

4. Rank the questions under each category

Form small groups by category interest; each group ranks the questions under each category (most to least important; redundancy; similarity), negotiating until they reach consensus.

5. Join a small group

Each teacher signs up for one category issue/question to pursue.

Joining a group builds on the critical feature of teachers making the choice (a fundamental element of learning) as it provides a vested interest in the area and an openness to learning in collaborative contexts. Transitioning from a *collective* group to a critical, collaborative *community* requires time, meaningful work, opportunity, relationship building, flexibility, and sustainability.

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