

# A Retrospective Analysis of a Professional Learning Community: How Teachers' Capacities Shaped It

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**Abstract**—The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of setting up a learning community within an elementary school in Ontario, Canada. The description is provided through reflection and examination of field notes taken during the yearlong training and implementation process. Specifically the impact of teachers' capacity on the creation of a learning community was of interest. This paper is intended to inform and add to the debate around the tensions that exist in implementing a bottom-up professional development model like the learning community in a top-down organizational structure. My reflections of the process illustrate that implementation of the learning community professional development model may be difficult and yet transformative in the professional lives of the teachers, students, and administration involved in the change process. I conclude by suggesting the need for a new model of professional development that requires a transformative shift in power dynamics and a shift in the view of what constitutes effective professional learning.

**Keywords**—Learning community model, professional development, teacher capacity, teacher leadership.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE learning community, a popular model for professional development across North America, is quickly becoming an aerosol word sprayed everywhere within the literature and within all levels of the organization. Because of this universal usage, the term professional learning community is in danger of losing its meaning [4].

A second definitional concern is that the learning community model has generally been positioned as a bottom-up model, but most professional development models impose top-down change on schools. Historically, implementation of change initiatives during periods of education reform has been top-down in nature [18], with most learning models, including the learning community model, following this trend. In the context of a learning community, where it is expected that learning in the organization will be energized from the bottom-up, this trend produces an inherent contradiction, which creates tension within schools. Consequently, teachers may resist the change, thinking, "This too shall pass," and

wait for the next great idea to surface [4, p. 6]. Regardless of the tensions created by the imposition in a top-down manner of a bottom-up learning model, however, successes do occur. One such success story is the focus for this article.

I begin with a brief overview of the learning community as a professional development model, followed by an outline of the professional context of this success story, and a description of learning community training and implementation used in the case. Although the Board's choice was [5] learning community model, I position the case within [18] learning community framework to point out the importance of building teachers' personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities. I conclude with a discussion about the potential relationship between teacher capacities in a developing learning community within a particular cultural context and the unexpected outcomes of enhanced teacher commitment to professional development. Finally, I present some future directions for research in learning communities that involve a fundamental shift in the way we view power hierarchies and professional learning within schools.

## II. LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A MODEL FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Current literature and research promotes the many benefits of the professional learning community [5]; [6]; [14] and [18]. For example, in a learning community, profound improvement in teaching and learning happens from within through a deep internal search for meaning, relevance, and connection, and an expression of members' personal, interpersonal, and leadership capacities in the pursuit of teaching and learning improvement. This process takes place in a school organization where power, leadership, and embedded structures exist to serve teaching and learning [18, pp138-139]. A spirit of continuous improvement arises from the inclusion and empowerment of all participants, staff, students, and the larger parent community, through shared leadership, and flattened hierarchies [6]-[18].

Some researchers like [5] believe that agreement exists between researchers, practitioners, and public opinion at all levels of the organizational hierarchy (Ministry of Education, Provincial, Board, and school levels) that learning communities are effective means for professional development that improves teaching and learning [22]. Consequently, they

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suggest that learning communities should be fostered and implemented at the school level. The pedagogical benefits for implementing the learning community model of professional development are clear in the literature; however, there exists a gap between the espoused theory and the actual experience of implementing the learning community. The gap occurs in the translation of the learning community professional development model into practice. Study of the gap analysis is interesting because it requires considerable effort to implement and sustain a learning community while the outcomes of the process may be unexpected. For example, the theory suggests that collaborative teams in a learning community can improve student learning, but collaboration especially among traditionally competitive teachers is very difficult to implement because it cannot be mandated.

There are many obstacles groups face in the challenging work of the change process, such as attempting to work together to achieve shared goals. For example, teachers may not assume positive intentions when others are introducing new ideas or alternately they can decide on an avenue too quickly to speed up the decision-making process rather than examining what are termed best practices or effective practices in detail and finding the preferred solution based on the gathered data. Conflicts may also arise if confusion exists about members' level of authority to make final decisions [8].

Learning communities may face even more serious obstacles when compliance is mandated by Board policies because in this case, it can appear to staff that they are being co-opted into working as a learning community by their employer and the principal's enforcement of Board policies. This context may lead to resistance by teachers or, more seriously, to subversion of teacher endeavours because it can lead to contrived collegiality. Furthermore, the learning community model may be somewhat conservative because of the difficulty of introducing new methods for teaching into an intact cohesive team that already works well together. As a result, the existing team may resist tampering with a model that functions well for them [7]. Although the learning community has some drawbacks, there are many benefits described in the literature that promote its use as a preferred model for teacher professional development.

One reason staff might embrace the learning community model is that educators feel empowered in the learning community setting because they have the opportunity to lead and be supported by colleagues in their leadership and new teaching practices [12]. Members of a learning community direct their energies towards improving their teaching to enhance student learning and achievement by engaging in sharing practices, implementing the practices, observing one another during implementation, reflecting to provide feedback, and revising practices based on observed student needs [15]. Hence, teachers engaged in a learning community improve through collaborative inquiry and the learning resulting from sharing experiences. By employing a model based on reflective teaching and action research, [13] propose that teachers engage in action to improve their practice by

using pertinent information, like student results, in a timely fashion.

One goal in school improvement is to provide appropriate student learning contexts, but teachers also require contexts that value hard work, risk-taking, and growth [17]. In this type of context, school people are involved in the difficult work of professional learning, change, and school improvement that leads to a commitment to students, school development, educational improvement, and learning for all [1], [12], [13] and [16]. If this is the desired context for schools, then it follows that observing the evolution of a school involved in learning community implementation contributes to understanding the nature of the work required. It also gives voice to the teachers who have been fairly silent in the learning community implementation literature to date.

In this paper, I describe one such evolutionary process for implementing a learning community in an urban school in southern Ontario. As an informal teacher-leader in that school, I was selected to participate in a locally developed pilot training program for learning community implementation. The program allowed for three other informal teacher-leaders and an administrator to participate in the learning community training. The learning community training was based primarily on effective schools research and [5] learning community model. The learning community training also highlighted the importance of using effective schools research and creating effective school teams through seven norms of collaboration: pausing, paraphrasing, probing for specificity, putting ideas on the table, paying attention to self and others, presuming positive intentions, and balancing advocacy and inquiry. This story provides a space for teacher voices to be heard through my reflections on the implementation process and how teachers' capacities helped to shape it.

### III. PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

Learning communities came into my school board because of the Board's Strategic Plan for 2003-2006. In this plan, a goal for retaining staff by providing opportunities for professional development was described and implemented as Policy 8.03 (2001). This policy document focused on improving student performance and system effectiveness by facilitating the continuous growth of staff through a comprehensive staff development program within the framework of system beliefs and goals of respect, innovation, and accountability. The method for staff development selected was the learning community model, which used the Board's Staff Development Standards document and methods for implementation across the curriculum. The standards focused on the goal of improving student performance by using effective instructional processes. The Board hoped to achieve this goal by building teachers' personal capacity through staff development.

In my school board, it was decided to begin the process of implementation of the learning community professional development model by using a locally developed training

program. This program was primarily based upon the work of [5] although there was reference to other literature. [5]'s model has six characteristics: shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (pp. 25-29).

This model was to be delivered by teacher facilitators and the school administrator who used a prescriptive methodology to train staff to work as an effective team. The members of this training team were called the directions team. At the school level, staff was assembled into groups called learning teams comprised of members across school divisions. As part of the implementation process, directions team members were to use action research as they worked with the learning teams throughout the implementation process. Staff members would receive the definition of the various learning community characteristics and literature to support its effectiveness and they would be expected to implement it through specific tasks. During meetings, members would be expected to have read the literature and to be ready to present their learning and understanding to their small group and then to the large group. Later, teachers were expected to implement the various characteristics in their daily professional lives. Throughout this process, I and the other members of the directions team were responsible for delivering to our colleagues at our school the training and materials provided to us during our training sessions.

To shape the activities and meetings with the staff members from my school, I based my work upon [18] learning community framework because I like the generative nature of this model. It provides space for the members to search for their own preferred method for creating a learning community. In their model [18] describe a school culture as a sense-making learning community where members use their capacities to improve teaching and learning for students. In other words, teachers' leadership abilities are focused on building capacity for enhancing the learning of all group members. The model has been described as a postmodern cultural approach that provides hope for profound improvement by employing meaningful local initiatives [2]. These initiatives are achieved as members collaborate to identify a pathway to success. Each staff group must invent itself as a learning community in an open and evolving way that focuses on using members' capacities to achieve improved teaching and learning.

This framework is constructivist in nature because it assumes learning community members have a wealth of professional knowledge and information to build upon one another's strengths in the capacity areas. Personal capacity includes any activities involved in building professional practice (e.g., building professional repertoires, knowledge, skills through in-service training). Interpersonal capacity is enhanced by activities promoting effective work with colleagues (e.g., implementing the norms of collaboration and working in effective teams). Finally, organizational capacity refers to any of the structures put in place to facilitate learning

and professional improvement (e.g., scheduled division team meetings designed for sharing effective teaching practices).

During this yearlong process, I kept extensive field notes to track the progress I made with my learning team. I reviewed these notes and identified pivotal events linked to the role of teacher capacities. Through my voice, you will hear the experience of teachers in the lived context and read how teacher capacities appeared to inform the development of a viable learning community.

#### IV. LEARNING COMMUNITY IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The Board expected that the pilot training program would result in staff that gained knowledge and skills around the following three broad topic areas:

1. The key features of a learning community,
2. Seven norms of collaboration, and
3. Two forms of conversation (dialogue and discussion).

The directions team was required to complete feedback sheets and implementation records to track the expected and actual outcomes of the training program, as well as to participate in action research to monitor learning community implementation at the school level. At the school, the directions team met to plan staff in-service sessions, to discuss implementation, and to determine future directions based on the feedback received from staff and other members of the directions team.

The goals were to describe the process for implementing a professional learning community and to study how teachers' personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities informed the process. The teachers in the school belonged to three elementary school divisions: primary, junior, and intermediate in a Kindergarten to Grade 8. The student body numbered approximately 300 from a low to moderate socio-economic demographic. Teachers belonged to a learning team made up of cross-divisional members focused on school improvement planning for building teacher capacity to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

The teacher facilitators and the principal belonged to the directions team. We participated in three training sessions and completed the required pre-reading including a review of the materials presented. The lengthy evening in-service training sessions were filled with activities (e.g., lecturettes, role-plays, professional literature reading, and so on). As a result, directions team members only had time to complete the assigned activities and superficially peruse the headings of the documents. In order to assimilate the skills and knowledge presented at the training sessions, we needed to review the session contents at home in detail. At a later date, we arranged several planning sessions prior to training staff and determined how to deliver the knowledge and skills presented at learning community training. At the end of each school training sessions, staff completed surveys or reflected aloud about the experience. This information was used to reflect on the findings and to revise the subsequent presentations.

There were a variety of topics and skills presented by the

directions team during the learning community implementation process. In the first session directions team members presented an overview of the locally developed learning community training program, a review of [5]'s professional learning community model, and a plan describing our school's commitment to the implementation project.

In the second training session, two professional articles were discussed that provided a definition for a collaborative school culture. A collaborative school culture was defined as a systematic process where staff works together to analyze and impact professional practise to improve collective results. The papers described how learning teams affect student achievement through members' collective effectiveness [3]. Seven Norms of Collaboration were introduced with specific emphasis on the first norm "pausing" to listen to voiced concerns by members and on the need for shared norms to produce effective meetings for team school improvement planning [9].

In the third meeting, we discussed article [3] that highlighted the collective improvement processes, professional dialogue versus discussion, common understandings, and effective meetings based on norms of collaboration. The directions team presented the remaining six norms, shared effective practices, reviewed Specific and Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound (SMART) goal-setting with practical school-based examples, and discussed building capacity to impact on school improvement planning effectiveness. This meeting concluded the formal portion of the learning community training over the academic school year.

In addition to presentations of training during staff meetings and early release professional activity days, learning community initiatives continued in other school-structured activities. These included school improvement planning committee meetings, division team meetings, and special events. During school improvement planning committee meetings and division team meetings, effective practices were discussed and their application in the classroom reviewed and reflected upon using action research methods. This reflection, revision, and discussion was intended to facilitate inclusion of the effective practices in the school improvement plan and to further discussion of the effective practices during learning community-training meetings.

For example, during division team meetings, some staff members participated in building other members' capacity by sharing literacy initiatives. One of these initiatives was a special event called a literacy day where cross-graded activity centres using identified effective practices were completed in team teaching environments. All primary classes rotated through various classrooms and activities. I shared my expertise and effective practices in using music to teach literacy, and I team-taught a lesson during the special event literacy day. In this experience, my effective practice was shared with a colleague who was observed to continue employing this particular effective practice in her classroom. We also continued to meet and to plan future literacy lessons

using music.

Throughout the learning community training process, I kept extensive field notes regarding particular items and understandings shared, including my perceptions around how teachers' capacities played out in the successes and failures experienced in the learning community implementation process. I have used these extensive notes, in the next section to describe the role that teachers' capacities played in informing the learning community.

## V. EXAMPLES DEMONSTRATING PERSONAL CAPACITY

The first learning community training session reviewed [5] professional learning community model for staff. As I circulated around the room, I observed that teachers appeared to be engaged in this activity; they participated actively in the pre-reading article activities and they shared their learning in small and then large group settings. Members appeared comfortable and relaxed throughout this exercise, alternately presenting and listening to members' ideas about the learning community material. The group had received previous in-service sessions describing the [5] learning community model and they were familiar with its characteristics.

Before the second session, teachers were asked to produce examples of effective practices in a variety of subject areas including reading, writing, mathematics, school environment, and parent involvement. Facilitators requested that teachers avoid using obvious assessment or testing examples like provincial standardized tests of writing and reading. In the second training experience teachers were asked to share their examples of effective practices with their learning team members. I noted that teams were enthusiastic and enjoyed sharing ideas with one another. The ideas were gathered and published within the school improvement plan for teachers' future reference.

Two professional articles were discussed with staff members during the second directions team training session. They presented their understanding of what a collaborative culture looked like in general and compared those with our own school culture. A few teachers commented that the primary teachers worked together more collaboratively than the junior and intermediate members. It was suggested that multiple like grades may be the reason for this observation (e.g., two grade 1 classes, two grade 3 classes). From my observations, I noted that teachers were quite candid in their descriptions of the strengths and weaknesses demonstrated within and between divisions. I also noted that the members had done the required pre-reading and thought about what it meant to form a collaborative school culture. Since the teachers had completed some thought and study about collaboration, they were able to articulate effectively their ideas and apply them to our current school culture.

Throughout the experience I found that teachers' capacities appeared to inform the development of a learning community. I observed significant changes in the practice of my colleagues as they made genuine attempts to implement many

of the strategies presented at the workshops. I witnessed team members sharing their effective practices with colleagues, and I saw them develop their personal capacities by incorporating the new knowledge gained.

#### VI. EXAMPLES DEMONSTRATING INTERPERSONAL CAPACITY

During our first directions team training session, one of our teachers voiced a concern regarding the concept of learning communities as a model for professional development. She wondered if the implementation of the learning community model was another hoop the Board was making us jump through that would cycle through and pass on to another fad within a year or two. She wanted to know why we were spending time with this fad rather than working on the school improvement plan, which was occupying so much of our personal before or after school time due to the scheduled school improvement planning meetings. Another directions team member and I responded by sharing our perception of the value of this model of professional development. We acknowledged that there are many cycles in education but we personally felt strongly that the learning community model would make a valid contribution in our school and that we hoped our presentations would illustrate its merit for her and the rest of the staff.

In the second directions team training session, we introduced Seven Norms of Collaboration. We focused on the first norm, pausing and led staff members in exercises to practice pausing with their learning team. These exercises demonstrated to the staff that shared norms are needed to produce effective meetings. The exercises also helped staff members work on their interpersonal capacity by teaching them to listen to one another's ideas before responding during meetings.

On the third learning community in-service training day, in addition to other activities, the staff reviewed SMART goal setting with practical school-based examples, and discussed building capacity to impact on school improvement planning effectiveness. Some staff members voiced concerns about having the time to meet and participate in SMART goal-setting because the original goals set in the school improvement plan were too numerous and lofty to accomplish. In this session, staff members commented that the overview of SMART goal setting was not specific to our context leading to inappropriate application to the school improvement plan. This example illustrated the learning team members' ability to recognize difficulties with implementation and to move forward towards a more achievable goal. Through this discussion, the team was able to assess and influence the direction of current goal setting and work together to benefit the school's success.

Throughout the various training sessions, I observed some teachers using their informal leadership to resist change and to subvert the group's progress. They did this by trying to discourage members from participating in effective practice sharing and by voicing negative opinions about the learning

community implementation process during staff meetings and early release day presentations. They also demonstrated their lack of support for the learning community initiative by missing required training sessions. As a result, the school administrator threatened to issue disciplinary letters to those teachers who did not attend, and ultimately sent one to a teacher who missed a meeting for a scheduled doctor's appointment.

In spite of these acts of resistance, I observed that teacher-resistors did participate in learning community implementation. Surprisingly, many teachers, including the resistors, described the value in using the effective practices within their classrooms during meetings. This observed success within the classroom may be the reason for their partial compliance. These staff members came from a culture that believed in doing what was best for children, and through group discussion in our meetings they saw that their efforts improved student learning. This provided a concrete reason for engaging in the change process even when they were unhappy with administrative behaviour and Board policies. In other words, I saw that teachers make changes and pursue new learning when they perceived their learning team to be supportive and trustworthy and the results valuable.

Some teachers enjoyed having the opportunity to lead even if they had never previously taken a leadership role. This was evident when a veteran teacher, who had been an early resistor, declared her enjoyment in a leadership project after she chose to participate and deliver literacy in-service training for her division and later for the whole staff during an early release day. In this example, the senior teacher-resistor demonstrated her personal capacity when she was observed to deliver literacy initiatives to the primary division staff members after her participation in literacy training. This senior teacher was encouraged by her learning and directions team to participate in the literacy training. These teachers demonstrated their interpersonal capacity when they facilitated the veteran teacher's buy-in to the change process and learning community implementation. After presentation of her literacy training she became one of the most committed and enthusiastic members of the learning community. The reinvigoration of her skills that she gained through this learning and leading experience also rejuvenated her commitment to teaching. This experience served as a morale booster and it may have influenced her to transfer those feelings of accomplishment to the learning community change initiative itself.

#### VII. EXAMPLES DEMONSTRATING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

What happened during learning community implementation was of interest because, initially, staff support for the directive was high and motivation was evident. Teachers were keen and met to discuss elements of training during scheduled staff meetings, early release professional development days, divisional meetings, and special events, as well as to participate in impromptu classroom, and hallway chats.

Administrators requiring teachers to meet in their learning and division teams either before or after school first initiated the development of organizational capacity. Formalized meeting times and agendas were set for these meetings, and teachers were expected to produce and record action plans, implementation strategies, and reflections on the outcomes. These required tasks demanded a considerable commitment of time and energy on the part of the staff. Members participated but some complained about the huge time investment. Others, however, commented about the benefits of using the shared effective practices within their own classroom settings.

As the initiative of implementing a learning community progressed, and the implementation demands increased, many difficulties arose in facing these challenges. Some teachers claimed that the mandatory learning community professional development staff meetings were in violation of the collective agreement and subverted the initiative by refusing to attend meetings that went longer than the time prescribed in the agreement. Learning community training sessions did run 3.5 hours in length at times, which was an extremely long time to remain after school for professional development. Other teachers demonstrated their lack of support by engaging in negative verbal commentaries during in-service sessions. Despite the resistance, eventually changes were observed in teachers' practice within their classrooms, and teachers began to meet regularly and worked on focus strategies for school improvement and they did so without these meetings being mandated by administration. The tangible results noted were improved student scores on report card grades, Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized test scores, and Directed Reading Assessment (DRA) scores.

In spite of some power struggles between the school administrator and various teachers, staff members gradually became involved and used their interpersonal and organizational capacities to influence their colleagues by assisting with implementation, reviewing the learning community materials and tasks, encouraging small steps in the process, capitalizing on individual strengths and using them to benefit the group, and encouraging resisters to attend literacy training and present new knowledge to colleagues in division team meetings. Many of the resisters eventually joined the implementation process through these small steps.

Other teachers did not have the confidence or inclination to lead or to demonstrate their personal capacity. They could, however, promote the formation of the learning community by building organizational capacities such as arranging for staff members to meet and preparing materials for sharing. Demonstration of these capacities was evident when a kindergarten teacher assisted by preparing materials for presentation while preferring not to present. This supportive role is important to the learning community because a variety of capacities are needed to produce a balanced group of individuals and a balanced approach to promoting learning in the school.

## VIII. DISCUSSION AND SOME FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The reflection paper suggests that participants did build capacity and improved student achievement. This observation is supported in the literature that suggests learning communities and teacher capacities do influence student learning and achievement [14]-[18]. Teachers' capacities informed the learning community and they had a greater commitment to professional development arising from their enhanced capacity. Teachers have many capacities that enable them to enhance the group's performance and build capacity. I observed that directions team facilitators alternated between personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities. I also noted that some teachers tended to favour one capacity over the other (e.g., always photocopying materials rather than generating ideas for presentation; organizational capacity versus personal capacity). Interestingly, in some cases I witnessed a change in focus by some members like the kindergarten teacher who developed her personal capacity and shifted from routinely using her organizational capacity to using her personal capacity by doing literacy presentations within the learning community.

These examples demonstrate that teachers' capacities play a definite role in learning community implementation by alternately supporting and pressuring team members to action or compliance. Resisters were observed to participate in the work of learning community implementation due to a culture of peers who alternated between tactics of support and pressure that encouraged them into compliance [11]. The resisters may also have participated in the learning community professional development activities because they believed in the power of the learning community model to ultimately benefit students. I noted resisters stating that they valued the time to meet with colleagues and the effective practices shared with them because they were useful in the classroom setting. I witnessed members who appeared to ignore the principal's instructions; hence, they did not participate because of administrator pressure. Principals can become partners in the implementation process if they overcome barriers by challenging hidden assumptions [24] and if they deal with resistant teachers by modeling appropriate interpersonal strategies like patience rather than disciplinary tactics [26]. When administrators use their interpersonal capacity to encourage and support staff members, they model the use of this capacity and they assist staff with the implementation of the change initiative rather than hinder it.

In my school's case, the principal did try to use collaborative leadership as a means for enhancing teachers' personal capacity and promote staff buy-in to learning community implementation. She did this by assigning various teacher-leaders to positions of leadership within the school. These included directions and learning team leaders, school improvement team leaders, division team leaders, and so on. Unfortunately, there were several resisters who used their interpersonal capacity to subvert the change initiative. It appeared that, as time progressed and implementation became

more difficult, the principal reverted to authoritarian tactics to force compliance. This led to contrived collegiality, increased resistance, and subversion attempts by teachers. In addition, the principal enforced required attendance at learning community training by threatening to issue disciplinary letters to non-compliant staff. Teachers resented these measures; they participated but complained vehemently during hallway chats or during division meetings. In other words, teachers complied but tried to encourage groups not to attend learning community training sessions, which demonstrates their use of interpersonal capacity to influence group members.

For learning communities to become realities, we require a transformative shift in power structures, formal and informal organizational structures, culture, and teaching pedagogies. This is an enormously difficult transition process; I have witnessed it to lead to struggles at all levels of the organization and between all members of the hierarchy. Conversely, I also witnessed it to provide fertile ground for groundbreaking improvement within a school culture by promoting school effectiveness through members' willingness to use their various capacities to participate actively and to learn within the growth process. Teachers' capacities appeared to enhance colleagues' capacities, which seemed to motivate students and led to improved student outcomes in report card grades and reading assessment scores within the learning community.

This success story shows the need to focus on paradigm shifts in teachers' and administrators' vision for school cultures. Administrators need to move from an autocratic top-down leadership model to a flattened shared model where all team members engage in leadership activities. The literature supports the principal's leadership role in partnerships with teachers as key catalysts for change [25]. This creates a cultural context where structures are designed to support a collaborative culture. [19] further suggest that administrators must motivate, plan, and organize staff to promote teacher growth and development. These partnerships or flattened power structures where all members collaborate and lead are enhanced when principals develop teacher collegiality [10]-[20], build team structures [21], and create communities of learners [23]. Teachers in turn need to have a transformative shift from the insular competitive model of teachers teaching behind closed doors to a collaborative and generative model where members share and build on the effective practices of their neighbours.

Overall, my case shows that when teachers perceive the learning community professional development model to be effective, they will commit time and effort to learning how to function as a learning community. As teachers' capacities grow and develop, the learning community theory is translated into practice. In my school, teachers' capacities grew through the use of action research activities that gave them opportunities to assess and reflect on the relationship between effective practices and improved student achievement. This implies that boards need to design professional development opportunities for teachers that showcase the rich diversity of

skills, talents, knowledge, and interests of participants

The teaching and learning process takes shape and structure by building upon teachers' capacities and forming a real group of interdependent learners. This paper supports some of the learning community literature about the process of implementation and staff motivation to participate in work that benefits students. It suggests that for real change and school improvement to take place administrators, teachers, boards, and Ministries of Education need to have a profound shift in mind-set to overcome the status quo and participate actively in effectively closing the gap between learning community theory and school practice. In this context, all members of the organization irrespective of their place in the hierarchy are encouraged and valued because they have valuable capacities to share and they have the ability to alternately lead and follow when appropriate structures and supports are in place for them to do so. These supports include a flattened power structure and a trusting, collegial, and supportive culture within the context of the learning community model of professional development.

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