Chapter 19

Toward a Model of Multi-Level Professional Learning Communities to Guide the Training and Practice of Literacy Coaches

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Triggered by criticism regarding the adequacy of training of literacy leadership candidates, this study sought to ascertain whether instructors in an online graduate-level literacy leadership course successfully engaged prospective coaches in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that reflected the roles they are expected to play in schools. Specifically, it sought to determine the extent to which candidates were exposed to key PLC attributes and processes, and whether the course was built on a viable training model. A key assumption of the study is that successful literacy-focused schools tend be organized as learning communities in which coaches work within faculty teams to achieve and sustain high levels of staff performance and student academic achievement. A survey of participants sought to determine whether PLC concepts and processes were adequately integrated into the course. Analysis

of learning conversations sought to ascertain whether candidates were engaged in PLC processes using a viable training model.

Were coaches exposed to key PLC concepts? Were they engaged in crucial processes? Was a viable training model used? The study indirectly affirms the efficacy of innovations geared at training literacy professionals online.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

As budgets shrink and staff rosters contract, schools find themselves hard-pressed to provide cost effective professional learning opportunities for teachers, often looking internally in their bid to sustain school improvement efforts. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in their various configurations (cross-functional teams; whole-faculty teams; building leadership teams; teacher study groups; lesson study teams) are resurging in popularity, and there is burgeoning research indicating that their ongoing, collaborative and job-embedded nature make them more effective than "fly-by" training workshops (Alberta InPraxis Group, 2006; AISR, 2003; Darlington-Hammond & Loewenberg-Ball, 1998; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Hord, 1997). While debates rage regarding definitions and the form such communities should take, their popularity in the educational literature seems unwavering, and literacy teacher educators are increasingly being called on to induct candidates into PLC principles, processes and practices. Such calls have increased in intensity given research indications that effective literacy-focused schools tend to be organized as PLCs in which faculty work together to re-culture their schools, to strengthen staff competence, to improve educational offerings and, ultimately, to enhance student outcomes (Alberta InPraxis Group, 2006; Gaffney, Hesbol, & Corso, 2005; Stoll, Bolan, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

The current study scrutinizes training practices in an online graduate-level literacy leadership course to discover whether training, as it stands, inducts prospective literacy coaches into concepts and processes of effective professional learning communities, whether provisions adequately mentor candidates toward implementing the kinds of PLCs proven to work for school improvement, and whether conversations among candidates and their facilitators could unveil a viable model to guide the training and future work of coaches. Key concerns involve whether the kind of collective thinking and problem-solving fostered in learning forums mirrors PLCs in which practitioners identify a broad range of school-related issues and work together to locate viable, research-based solutions to strengthen leadership, instruction and student learning, and whether interactions mirrored PLCs processes at three crucial levels: *instrumental action* aimed primarily at improving both teacher and student performance, *systems thinking* focused on mainly on improving school conditions,

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