Chapter 23
Generalizable Models for Online Professional Learning Communities for America's K–12 Teachers

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ABSTRACT

America's teachers are burning out. The emergence of teacher-centered online professional learning communities (PLCs) is a relatively new phenomenon with unestablished boundaries. The questions to be answered are: (1) What are the opportunities, issues, and challenges associated with online PLCs for K-12 teachers? (2) What are generalizable models for designing, implementing, and managing online PLCs for K-12 teachers? An exhaustive review gathered, organized, evaluated, coded, analyzed, and synthesized 45 relevant studies, dissertations, articles, and reports that examined online teacher PLCs. The goal was to identify and highlight conflicts, contradictory ideas among findings. The intent was to bridge gaps between theories and principles to create a common framework and generalizable models. This study was relevant because it sought to identify opportunities, issues, and challenges associated with online teacher PLCs and successful evidence-based micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level replicable practices for broader generalization.

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INTRODUCTION

What would America be without qualified K-12 teachers? While this question might sound rhetorical, Garcia and Weiss (2019) warn education administrators, policymakers, and parents should turn an increased focus toward a coming perfect storm. America's teachers are burning out from teacher shortages, stressful working conditions, and a perceived lack of support. After examing a stratified sampling of 60,000 teachers that responded to the 2017-2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), Garcia & Weiss found 48.7 percent of respondents expressed some levels of dissatisfaction with being a teacher, 27.4 percent admitted thoughts they would leave the teaching profession at some point, and a disturbing 57.5 percent felt they would not return to teaching if they went back to college at some point. The primary reasons cited were teachers felt they lacked influence over what they teach (71.3 percent) and the instructional materials they use (74.5 percent). Garcia & Weiss attributed these factors to why America faced a 100,000-teacher shortage during the 2017-2018 school year and described the phenomenon as a recognized but poorly understood national crisis (Garcia & Weiss, 2019a). In subsequent studies, the researchers mapped the strong correlations between on-the-job training and professional development and teacher job satisfaction. Garcia & Weiss recommends improvements in the types and usefulness of the professional supports offered to teachers. They found such efforts should include efforts to help them stay abreast of advances in research on effective teaching practices, strategies for facing challenges, and advocacy (Garcia & Weiss, 2019b).

One particularly promising and emerging trend is the increasing number of online teacher professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs are usually teams of teachers engaged through social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) in e-learning communities where they share and learn from each other (Beach, 2012). However, the rapid growth and prevalence of online teacher-focused PLCs beg the questions: Is the excitement about PLCs as an alternative to traditional teacher professional development approaches justified? What types of PLC peer-directed and self-regulated learning practices work best? Which PLCs are designed to accommodate particular learning styles and learning needs? What types of learning tools are available to PLCs participants that might not otherwise be available? Are investments in administrative-supported PLCs socially and economically smart (Fabio & Antonietti, 2012)?

A plethora of empirical studies have found online PLCs help teachers share teaching tips and techniques, promote collaborative and social learning, and provide guidance emotional support for teachers within a virtual community of peers (Ahmad et al., 2013; Ahmad & Tasir, 2013;Azevedo & Cromley, 2004; Darmadi, 2018; Dascalu et al., 2015; Lo, 2012; McManus, 2000; Ozyurt & Ozyurt, 2014; Scheiter, 2009; Švarcová & Jelínková, 2016; Taub et al., 2014; Truong, 2016; Wells, 2011). Research also points toward the potential of PLCs to create a paradigm shift in professional development approaches for K-12 teachers and the value of collaborative problem-solving with like-minded peers (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Teachers themselves have claimed benefits from engaged learning within collaborative e-learning environments that enabled them to share resources and knowledge with other K-12 teachers (Anwauddin, 2015; Ballenger, 2001). Nevertheless, critics have claimed the evidence is inclusive that online PLCs actually improve K-12 teachers' learning experiences compared to traditional professional learning approaches. Others claim online PLCs approaches are too simple and that the benefits of participation are not shared equally among all participants (Akbulut & Cardak, 2012; Gerjets, 2009; Hamid, 2015). Researchers have also noted that online PLC administration is often sloppy and disorganized with little learning taking place among its members (Lang & Fitzgerald, 2005, Verborgh & Dumontier, 2018). Other studies have identified the need to review the literature to