

Collaborative Learning Communities

By: Deborah Q. Seidel, MetLife Fellow, TNLI Fairfax County

“I’m sorry, Dee. There’s just no way to include Linda in your Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings for third grade. The only way to have the meeting each week is if your students are in ‘specials.’ Linda will be teaching third grade music at that time. However, I can assure you that your class will be assigned to Linda for the school year so that you can collaborate on your research project,” explained Janice. “I am interested to see how you two co-teach a unit of folklore and story retelling through music and reading.”

Dee Miller, a third grade teacher at Shady Grove Elementary School, was disappointed, if not surprised, to hear her administrator, Janice Melbourne, explain the scheduling conflicts that made it difficult to include Linda Sampson, the general education music teacher and her teacher research partner, in the third grade PLC. Dee and Linda, however, were determined. Even if it meant meeting during lunch time and before or after school, they were committed to working on this. Dee missed the music integrated into the curriculum that she enjoyed when teaching kindergarten. Linda was excited to find a general education teacher that was as interested in meeting the requirements of the county music Program of Studies (POS), as she was doing so for the Virginia state-mandated testing guidelines, the Standard of Learning (SOLs). They’d figure something out to work together. There was always e-mail, right?

Shady Grove Elementary School

Shady Grove Elementary School was a neighborhood school with approximately 880 students, ranging from kindergarten students to sixth grade elementary students. While historically an upper-middle class to affluent community school with minimal racial and cultural diversity, the school’s demographics had changed in recent years. County boundaries were opened up to widen the population to include several townhouse complexes and new neighborhoods. Additionally, Shady Grove had no English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) population, so students who needed those services were sent to another elementary school, that is a center for that instruction. Most classes had 26 to 28 students. There were 107 students who get pulled out for gifted and talented instruction for one hour each week. Special education served 157 students in a variety of settings, from full inclusion into general education classes to a self-contained autism class of about six students.

The district school officials for Shady Grove Elementary introduced a county-wide initiative for school improvement, known as Professional Learning Communities (PLC). According to Eaker, Dufour, and Burnette, “a professional learning community is educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve.” After administrators and key teacher leadership teams received a crash course in PLC, the county mandated that PLC be implemented in every school in the county beginning in the second quarter of the 2005 school year. Teachers were informed in a series of faculty meetings, shown a video, and asked to read about PLC in *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning*

Materials for this case were taken from *What happens when specialists collaborate?* (2005), by Lucinda Sexton a TNLI MetLife fellow 2004-05, and *Tune in! A study in collaboration: Integration of music and language arts in a third grade class*, by Deborah Q. Seidel and Lucinda Sexton (A PowerPoint ® Presentation presented as a round table discussion at the 2006 Fairfax Teachers Research Conference at The Waterford).

Communities, by Eaker, Dufour, and Burnette. They write that the goal of PLC is to foster collaboration and shared vision, thereby developing a school mission focused on results and continued improvement.

County superintendent, David Sampson, mandated that each school administrator institute PLC in the winter of 2005. Despite the county mandate, school administrators were left largely to make the determination on how to do that. At Shady Grove, PLC's were instituted at the grade level teams.

Recipe for Collaboration

"So much for collaboration at PLC," whispered Dee. "What a joke! Each week, we meet for 45 cram-packed minutes of team mumbo jumbo, when the real collaboration is relegated to snatched moments over lunch or team discussions on the playground."

"Don't I know it! How sad when we have to e-mail each other to make up stuff to put on the agenda," replied Marty, Dee's teammate. "As if we don't already share everything we do, and plan together. These meetings just take time away from the *real* work of planning, preparing, and remediation. By the way, Dee, thanks for that multiplication remediation activity. Carl really got it! I was so proud of him! He did great on the math test."

"Hey, how long do you think it will be before Dr. Sampson makes us all work lock-step? I mean, I love you guys, but I could never make the learning centers you do work for my special-needs kids. I need to have much more teacher direction, and using parent volunteers is tricky with confidentiality concerns. What if they make us all do the same thing?" grumbled Kimberly.

"That would be all it takes to drive me from teaching all together. Hush... here comes Janice," warned Dee. "Hello Janice. Here's the agenda for our meeting. We're planning the math calendar for next month."

Similar scenarios played out throughout the building, around the copier, and in the staff lunch room. The administration was aware of the reluctance of the staff, and who could really blame them. If Janice was going to be totally honest, she wasn't sure exactly what it was the county wanted from them. She was proud of her teachers, and for the most part she felt they worked well as team players before PLC was initiated. Sure, some of the teams needed to work on sharing and getting along—but those were personality issues that were not likely to disappear behind the structure of an agenda and the rhetoric of a mission or vision.

PLC Workshop

Janice paused outside the teacher's prep room. Dee, her third grade team leader, and Kay, an experienced first grade teacher were having a hushed but spirited discussion about collaboration.

Kay went on, "If you ask me, it's all a big pile of hogwash. In my 25 years of teaching, I've never been expected to carry the weight of everyone else's problems! It's not my responsibility if the other teachers on my team aren't able to control their kids and plan their lessons to be effective. They're simply not training teachers to be responsible for their own lessons."

Dee was shocked. "Kay, you don't really mean that, do you? There's so much to learn from each other. It's not just the younger teachers learning from the older ones. Everyone has something to share. I'm learning so much from Linda in our integrated unit of folktales and music—."

“Are you kidding me?” interrupted Kay. “You are actually wasting your time on a unit of study on music? Since when is music a state mandated Standards of Learning for third grade? Did I miss something or are they testing that at third grade now?”

“Oh Kay! You are incorrigible. You’re not really as hard on collaboration as all that, are you?” laughed Dee.

“Humph. I’ll close my door and do what needs to be done to reach *my* kids. Let’s see them try to fire me,” Kay retorted, as she collected her copies to leave.

Janice slipped back into her office around the bend in the hall, contemplating the conversation she’d just overheard. Maybe I should be dragging Kay to this workshop with Linda, she thought.

Janice and the leadership team, including Linda, attended a county-mandated workshop on PLC. They were given directions to engage in a powerful group process. Teachers needed to be a part of the decision process in the goal setting, the content, and ultimately, the vision. Also, there was a clear difference between grade level meetings and collaborative learning teams.

A light went on for Linda. How are Shady Grove’s teachers participating in the goal setting? What training have they been given to have a chance to create collaboration? How could Shady Grove break out of the traditional team meeting approach in order to embrace the collaborative approach that PLC was meant to be?

Workshop Follow-Up

Laden with these new ideas and questions, Linda attended a meeting with Janice and the leadership team to discuss some of her questions. The leadership team agreed that the big resentment centered on teachers’ perceptions of giving up their planning time. While Janice recognized that the current PLC meetings at Shady Grove were really team meetings, she felt that it was important for them to continue, but they needed a new name: Team Meetings. But where did that leave them for meeting the expectations for PLC meetings from the county?

Ideas for helping to clarify the difference between PLC and team meetings included staff meetings focused on clarification and training with fun and interactive approaches such as skits or interactive games. Monday afternoons were currently set aside for meetings, training, and staff meetings. Students were released two hours early to facilitate this. Some Monday afternoons could be used for PLC; that way, specialists could be a part of it. Linda wondered how it would be received by the faculty.

Teacher Research Group

As the weeks passed, Dee and Linda worked toward their vision of a collaboratively taught unit. Dee took Linda to the reading room to look through third grade literature to find a story that would meet the requirements needed for retelling using musical elements such as rhythm, voice, and movement. Linda had never been to the reading room before. They selected the perfect story, and discussed how Dee would introduce the story in a reading class. Linda would follow up with a directed retelling using the musical elements they had decided on together. How exciting. Linda was thrilled at this new direction in her teaching. She couldn’t wait to share this at their next teacher research meeting.

Dee and Linda met with four other professionals for a half day of teacher research group discussion and work. This was Shady Grove’s first year having a teacher research group. Dee started the group after transferring from another local school which had one. She personally had two years experience in teacher research, one as a leader. Oddly enough, there were several other

specialists besides Linda in the group, including Amy, the general education art teacher, who was researching better teaching techniques for use with her autistic students. She was working with Diane, an occupational therapist. Diane was an expert in her field, but split her time across several schools, servicing special-needs students. She was excited to be part of a group that put her in touch with teachers. Then there was Marty, another third grade teacher, a reluctant researcher who had much to offer, but felt overwhelmed. Finally there was Jill, a fifth grade teacher who focused on technology, and drew a hard line on the necessary academics, and the extras such as the specials of physical education, art, and music.

While she respected those areas, she didn't feel that their curriculum was as critical to student success as those that the state tested such as the core curriculum she was held to teaching. Research discussions were aimed at meeting the various needs and interests of the teachers.

Amy and Diane were working together to meet the needs of the self-contained autism students in art class. Amy pointed out at one meeting, "You know, I have had *no* training on how to meet the needs of autistic students. The county provides no training for specialists on meeting the needs of this population. I was so frustrated! I go to their class and the teachers take their much needed breaks, but I am left with no guidance. The instructional assistants just end up doing their project for them. If I hadn't started asking Diane for some ideas, I would have had no idea what to do."

Diane replied, "These students have specific behavior modification plans that help them learn. Amy had no resources or training in that. Since we're working on this action research project, now we can work together to meet their needs. We're doing ground-breaking work. I don't know of anyone else who's working on this. When it was time to do a literature review, all we have to go on is clinical studies on Autism."

"I'm glad I have you," laughed Amy.

"Well, this is really the first time that I have been involved with teachers in this way. Janice has been so supportive of my work, and in all the years that I have been working for the county, this is the first time that I have really felt a part of the staff. Individual therapy is very rewarding, but it is *very* different than managing the larger class groups that you folks do," Diane commented. "I get to be a part of the implementation of the suggestions I make. The follow-through is fascinating."

Jill spoke up, "I wish I could convince Leah to join us. My project is on interactive white board technology in my fifth grade class. Leah would be a valuable asset since she's our technology specialist. Although she was interested, she said that Janice wasn't in favor of her being out of the building for a half-day each month, on top of her T-Spec meetings that already pull her from the building each month."

Amy laughed, "Technology, Ha! I'd just be happy if everyone kept me in the loop for their teaching themes. The county mandates that my art curriculum 'support' the SOLs, but provides no planning time for me to meet with teams to discuss these themes. Except for a few select teams, I *never* hear what's going on with learning units in most grades."

Jill replied, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but don't you think it is a little more important that teachers have time to plan their core curriculum such as science, social studies, math, and language arts. If you all don't keep the kids busy for us, when would we plan?"

"Keep the kids busy?" Amy choked. "Do you realize what you just said?"

Realizing that the conversation was heating up quickly, Dee quickly interrupted. "Speaking of getting busy, let's grab our data and get started sharing our revised research findings. We can

always debate PLC around the coffee pot in the morning,” she laughed. The group sighed in relief. The tension of the moment passed, and they continued on.

Dee led the group through reflective journal techniques and more discussion. However, the discussion returned to the hot topic of PLC as it usually did.

“Does anyone really get PLC? I mean, it just seems like another way to check up on us anyway: weekly meetings, with an agenda and notes posted on the staff e-mail. Big Brother here we come!” vented Marty.

“I don’t think everyone really understands PLC yet,” explained Linda. “I’ve been a part of the leadership team and we went to a workshop on it a few months ago. I thought things were going to change following that workshop, but that was two months ago. PLC and team meetings aren’t really the same thing, but teachers need to be trained on that, although it doesn’t look like that’s happening right now.”

“Perfect! More training. That’s just what we all need!” screeched Dee. “What Janice should realize is that our teacher research group is the best PLC she could find.” Everyone laughed.

Success

Dee and Linda, Amy and Diane, and the rest of the teacher research team continued throughout the year to meet and collaborate on their projects. At the end of the year, the group shared their projects at round-table presentations at a faculty meeting. Everyone was excited to have the outcomes. Dee noticed that Kay and the other usual teachers were uninterested, feeling that any meeting was a waste of time, but if the interest in next year’s research group was any indication, teacher research had a successful first year, and a promising future at Shady Grove Elementary School.

The following spring of 2006, Dee and Linda met at the local teacher research convention to share their work on collaborative teaching in general education and music, and to present in a round-table format. It had been a year since their research, and months since they had seen each other. Linda had transferred to another local elementary school. Perhaps a good move for many reasons, but both Dee and Linda missed the opportunity to refine and continue their collaborative teaching.

Dilemmas

As Dee and Linda caught up on each other’s lives and work, Linda asked about the Shady Grove’s journey toward collaborative communities. Although she was no longer there, she wondered whether teachers received the necessary training to fully understand and move toward accepting and implementing PLC as it was meant to be. Has the county recognized the need for training teachers of special populations and/or new initiatives? Dee sat back with a sigh, “Linda, I sure miss your enthusiasm and tenacity. That’s what made our collaborative research a success in the first place. Any chance you’ll be coming back to Shady Grove? I need a collaborative teaching partner for next year.”

Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits and draw backs of implementing collaborative teaching environments that are mandated or created by external policy of the school systems or county regulations?
2. How does teacher collaboration take place outside formal meetings?

3. What are the alternatives to the traditional team meeting approach to collaborative teaching scenarios?
4. What do specialists and general education teachers offer each other in their goals of student success in achievement?
5. Does the teacher research group meet the expectations of a Professional Learning Community? Why or why not?
6. What does the county school system assume about teachers with its Professional Learning Community initiative?
7. What advice would you give Janice Melbourne, Shady Grove's administrator?

References

Eaker, Robert, DuFour, Richard, & DuFour, Rebecca. (2002). *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*. Indiana: Solution Tree.