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TE 872: Teacher as Teacher Educators

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June 2, 2017

Teachers as Lifelong Learners

Teachers must continue to learn throughout their careers. There will never be a time when a teacher knows it all, when no more learning needs to take place or when they can just coast by doing the same thing year after year. The question then is how can schools help create a culture that encourages and supports lifelong teacher learning? In addition, how can schools ensure that this teacher learning is not “episodic, superficial, and disconnected (Little, 2006, p. 1)? While reading Craig and Little this week, two main topics stood out to me. First, is regarding the kind of knowledge that teachers need to obtain throughout their careers. Second, is how schools can build a professional community that allows their teachers to successfully collaborate as they address school goals, student learning, and teacher practices.

Teacher must have an extensive knowledge of their content. If they only know the basics or are learning the material a day before they teach it (as often happens to new teachers), they will be unprepared to answer questions and unable to connect the content to the larger picture. While it is not always possible to offer professional develop that caters to the content of all teachers in a school, individual teachers can grow their content knowledge through graduate classes, conferences/conventions, offerings through a local ISD or even through a summer institute. However, as Little (2006) points out, “simply knowing a subject is not sufficient for knowing how to teach it” (p. 7). The teacher must also have knowledge of how to teach to the content. Shulman coined the term pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and Little (2006) described it as the “practical knowledge that enables teachers to transform the content and

epistemology of a subject discipline for purposes of teaching” (p. 7). While this is a great start, there is even more for teachers to know. Mishra & Koehler later added technology to Shulman’s framework and coined the term TPACK - Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge. When all three types of knowledge intersect, student learning is maximized. So how does a teacher learn more about pedagogy and technology? Little (2006) suggests that “this pedagogical content knowledge is most effectively developed through professional development that...is content-focused, active, collective, coherent, and sustained” (p. 8).

While professional development can be delivered in many ways, one way to help make it sustainable and to avoid a “scattered, shallow, fragmented array of activity” (Little, 2006, p. 4) is through the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) that meet regularly and with purpose. Teachers need to support each as they work toward a goal that is larger than themselves. Little (2006) points out that research has shown “that schools benefited when teachers achieved high levels of collaboration and adopted a norm of ‘continuous improvement’” (p. 16). Teachers need to unite together as they seek to improve their classroom and their school. As part of this, teachers must recognize that they are not islands. According to Dufour, PLCs “focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and [are] accountable for results” (Craig, 2013, p. 27). While Craig goes on to criticise the implementation of PLCs and describe how they fail to compare to Knowledge Communities (KC), I disagree with his article and I believe that the scenario he described at T. P. Yaeger Middle School is an outlier of how most schools implement PLCs. I also think Craig tries too hard to contrast knowledge communities and PLCs while I believe they have more similarities than differences. I personally have found PLCs to be very beneficial to both teacher and student learning in our school and I have not found them to be a “cookie cutter approach” nor have I felt that our “teachers were expected to act as carbon copies of one another and school programmes contained little

variation” (Craig, 2013, p. 35). Instead, I have found that this “shared responsibility for student learning” set up by the introduction of PLCs has yielded “higher levels of student learning” in my school (Little, 2006, p. 2). As can be seen by this week’s articles, continually building teachers knowledge of content, pedagogy and technology as well as the implementation of professional learning communities can intersect to create a learning centered school (Little, 2006, p. 20).

Resources

Craig, Cheryl J. (2013). Coming to know in the “eye of the storm”: A beginning teacher’s Introduction to different versions of teacher community. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 29, 25–38.

Little, Judith. (2006). Professional community and professional development in the learning-centered school, 1–34. Washington, DC: National Education Association.