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Professional Learning Communities: Where Does Special Education Fit in?

Abstract
This project will consist of an in-depth review of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and their increasing role in districts and schools across the country. This project will document successes of PLCs and those components of a PLC that are most essential to the success of beginning and maintaining one. It will also look at the barriers that arise in attempting to implement a PLC in a district and/or school, and how best to overcome those barriers. Finally, this project will focus on the implications for special education when formulating and implementing a PLC in a school.

Methodology will consist of library and/or archival research, along with attendance at a PLC conference and interviews with those administrators attempting to start a PLC in their respective schools.

The final form of this completed thesis will be a lengthy research paper, including the implications for special education in the implementation and administration of PLCs.

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES –

WHERE DOES SPECIAL EDUCATION FIT IN?

By

Jacqueline B. Shipley

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors Program

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in the Special Education Department

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date _____

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES –
WHERE DOES SPECIAL EDUCATION FIT IN?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction……	1
What is a Professional Learning Community……	3
Problems in Forming a Professional Learning Community……..	9
Overcoming Barriers to a Professional Learning Community……..	20
Special Education and the Professional Learning Community…….	30
Implications for Special Educators in a Professional Learning Community……..	32
Conclusion…….	36

Introduction

Imagine the ideal school – the principal is a knowledgeable administrator, supportive of both the students and teachers; the teachers work in teams to plan instruction, development assessments, analyze data, and use strategies to help those struggling students; the students come to school eager to learn, prepared, and are hardworking; and the families of the students are motivated, supportive, and follow through at home with what is taught at school. Is this a pipe dream for students and educators alike? With budgetary cutbacks, lack of time, and focus on high-stakes testing, have the needs of the students been lost in the day-to-day operation of our schools?

The best interests of the students can be developed and reached, but it truly "takes a village to educate a child." Educational reform or "strategic planning" for educational purposes has been initiated in many shapes and forms over the years. In the late 1980s, Michael Schmoker began to work closely with schools to develop "strategic plans" based on the corporate model (426). However, in attempting to develop these "comprehensive" or "systemic" plans, he discovered that what works for the business community does not necessarily work for the educational community. Some of the difficulties he encountered, specific to the world of education, were as follows:

Clarity and coherence suffered. There was a lack of clear definitions of key terms. For example, the words "goals" (something that could be measurable) and "action steps" were used interchangeably; merely implementing a new technique or training was evidence of having met a goal. It was shown that less than 10% of what is planned actually gets implemented (427).

Hidden assumptions. Schmoker found that strategic plans, for all their logical connections between mission, goals, and evaluations, contained assumptions, but not actual facts, about the effectiveness of the planning, the value of workshops and staff development, and the school's ability to meaningfully monitor a large number of initiatives (426).

Overload and its impact. Schmoker discovered that the majority of these plans had one common characteristic – they were huge. The sheer size of these plans just adds more confusion and becomes more of a burden. These complex and burdensome plans simply outweigh a teacher's ability to find the time and capacity to implement same (428).

And last, but not least, Schmoker states that ***staff development*** was sorely lacking in its follow-up support or meaningful attempts to monitor implementation. Schmoker further states that in order to fulfill the promise of professional development, staff development needs to be "built around collaborative exchange, in which teachers work together, reflect on their practice, exchange ideas, and share strategies" (430).

No one administrator, teacher, or even parent, can or should have to do it alone. In particular, special educators cannot afford to plan and work in isolation. Collaboration is the keyword necessary to build a successful school community. Collaboration must occur between administrators, educators (general and special), students, and families. The formation and implementation of Professional Learning Communities can be an effective step in establishing and maintaining collaboration between all parties for the good of the students.

What is a Professional Learning Community?

In the educational world, the term "Professional Learning Community" ("PLC") has become the new buzzword. PLC has its roots in *learning organizations*, originally coined by Peter Senge in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, and initially developed for the corporate organization and structure. Its purpose was to foster collaborative efforts, increase results, and thinking outside the box (3). Senge further states that "organizations need to discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels" (4). This statement can apply not only to our students, both in general and special education, but also to teachers, individually and as a group. In its attempts to implement reform, the educational profession has discovered Senge's method, simply changing the name to *learning communities* as a more reflective label of its mission. The term "community" can encompass all facets of the educational world – from federal and state departments to county and local districts to administrators and teachers, along with the communities, families, and students who stand to benefit. Professional learning communities are made up of a total group of learners; i.e., everyone from the administrators to the students and parents are learners in this community.

Whether called a learning organization or learning community, according to Richard DuFour, this practice contains the following common (or similar) characteristics:

- Shared mission, vision, values, goals
- Collaborative teams focused on learning
- Collective inquiry into "best practice" and "current reality"
- Action orientation/experimentation
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Results oriented

What exactly is a "shared mission?" Every individual school has a stated mission, usually something to the effect of "educating all children," "democratic core values,"

and/or "care and nurturing environment." But how does a school's mission translate into a collaborative atmosphere? In order to foster such a collaborative atmosphere, the "buck stops at the top." In order words, such a shared mission and/or goals must begin with a belief by the principal and other administrators in a specific school (or district) that this is the direction that the school must take. How does that take place, however? Does the principal force his or her ideas of what the ideal learning community should be upon the staff, or is the staff encouraged to identify and focus on those issues most relevant to their situation? In *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, Collins and Porras speak of the ability of those successful organizations to embrace contradictory ideas at the same time. They referred to it as the rejection of the "Tyranny of the Or" and embracing of the "Genius of the And" (43-44); i.e., rather than having to choose between Idea A and Idea B, a way to have both A and B, was conceived. A philosophy, along with conceptual images were developed as the driving force of the entire organization, but individuals within the organization were encouraged to develop creative and innovative strategies central to the organization's purpose. Collins and Porras state that those leaders who embrace the "Genius of the And" demonstrate a "loose-tight leadership" or "directed autonomy" (45). This is described as having the leader(s) focus on identification and articulation of the mission while at the same time encouraging individual and organizational autonomy in the day-to-day operations within the defined parameters set by the leader(s). In order words, the principal will identify and speak to the shared mission, while the teachers will carry out this mission in whatever forms necessary within the set parameters.

How does a school community reach a shared vision or mission when there is such a diverse population of ideas, values, and concepts? While all staff should be involved in setting a vision for a particular school, a primary objective of any school community must focus on student learning; i.e., that all students can and will learn to the best of their ability, and the school will find a way to reach those students whose learning lags behind.

Collaborative teams focused on learning is the first step to implementing this vision. This is an area that special education has led the way in. Since the beginning, special educators have had to collaborate with a variety of people and interests in order to best serve students. Special educators collaborate with everyone – administrators, general educators, parents and/or other family members, medical personnel, social workers, psychologists, community and business leaders, and most importantly, the student. Unlike general education, special education has never been able to work in isolation; the best interests of the student demands a collaborative approach to education and transition issues for these students. This same collaborative approach needs to be reached throughout the general school population in order to form a true learning community. What is collaborated about needs to be looked at as opposed to whether people collaborate or not. Unfortunately, numerous obstacles to collaboration stand in the way.

Once collaborative teams are formed, inquiry into “best practice” and “current reality” begins. This begins by building shared knowledge. This is the process whereby a team sets their essential outcomes based upon such resources as local, state and/or federal standards, district benchmark assessments, assessment frameworks (how these

outcomes will be assessed), past student performance on established standards, examples of student work and the criteria upon which it is assessed, etc. It is necessary for each team to set out a specific number of essential outcomes per semester per content or course area. The team must work interdependently towards this common goal with all members of the team being held mutually accountable for the results. According to DuFour, each team should identify specific SMART goals consisting of the following:

- Strategic and Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Results-oriented
- Time bound

By setting these SMART goals, the team is able to focus on a measurable goal to be reached within a certain time parameter. When a goal is set out in measurable terms within a specified time period using a common assessment, the teams are able to then focus on how best to achieve the outcomes they desire. This becomes especially important when the current realities of lack of time and resources come into play. This necessitates a team exploring more innovative and creative solutions to their difficulties.

By setting a timeframe in which to achieve these essential outcomes, the team must be action-oriented in order to reach the agreed-upon goals. This is not the time or place for teachers to be close-minded and judgmental about the way others do things. Teachers working together to share their ideas and suggestions can only lead to better outcomes for the students, but teachers must remain open-minded and flexible to new ideas. New suggestions do not imply that the conventional or usual methods were bad or ineffective, just that there might be an easier and/or more efficient way to achieve the necessary results. Unfortunately, teachers have a tendency to be territorial about their

knowledge and methods, and feel that they are being insulted if a new way of doing something is suggested. This is where the leadership role of learning communities comes into play. Shirley Hord (1997) states that "the traditional pattern that teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage is completed altered…[There is]no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need for everyone to contribute" (qtd. in Carmichael, 393).

By setting of SMART goals and its measurable outcomes, there is always a commitment to continuous improvement. In order to measure these outcomes, however, a common assessment must be used. Why must a common assessment be used by the same grade, the same team, etc.? DuFour lists six reasons why common assessments are necessary in learning communities:

- **Efficiency -** by sharing the load, teachers save time.
- **Fairness** - promotes common goals, similar pacing, and consistent standards for assessing student proficiency.
- **Effective monitoring** - provides timely evidence of whether the guaranteed and viable curriculum is being taught and learned.
- **Informs individual teacher practice -** provides teachers with a basis of comparison regarding the achievement of their students so they can see strengths and weaknesses of their teaching.
- **Team capacity -** collaborative teacher teams are able to identify and address problem areas in their program.
- **Collective response -** helps teams and the school create timely, systematic interventions for students.

It is only when the students are being compared on a fair and efficient basis, can the teachers effectively monitor both their teaching and the students' learning, and strive for ways to improve both.

Finally, a professional learning community is results oriented. Whether the learning community is successful or not is cut-and-dried. If the results of the essential outcomes are met, then the plan was successful. Intentions mean absolutely nothing; it is the final result that counts. However, a learning community should not be discouraged or disappointed by an unfavorable outcome. This simply means that the team must work together to discover a different method in which to achieve the necessary result. Improvement is always a work in progress. What works one year/semester might not work another, and the team must be flexible enough to be willing to adjust their methods of instruction accordingly.

Hord goes on to describe what she believes are attributes of a professional learning community (2):

- **Supportive and shared leadership**. A PLC not only recognizes the leadership role and influence of the principal (or other administrator), but on the other hand, the principal shares leadership, power and (most importantly) decision-making with teachers.

- **Collective creativity**. All participants learn to apply new ideas and information to problem solve and create new solutions for students.

- **Shared values and vision**. There is an unwavering focus strictly on student learning.

- **Supportive conditions**. This takes into account both the physical conditions of the staff coming together (when, where, and how) and people capacities (respect, trust, willingness to be open-minded and non-judgmental).

- **Shared personal practice**. This is not looked at as an evaluation process by ones' peers, but rather "peers helping peers" and a willingness to share both successes and defeats.

While specific definitions of PLCs might differ in some of the language of the various components, all PLCs share one common trait, and that is the collaboration

factor. This is a specific area in which special educators can bring their experience and knowledge to the table to share with general educators. As any special educator knows, two heads are better than one, and four is even better than two! When the majority of time in one's job is spent talking, assessing, and analyzing with others, it is virtually impossible not to become experienced in the process of collaboration. Special educators are able to bring a depth of understanding of the process of collaboration that might ordinarily be missing in a PLC.

Problems in Forming a Professional Learning Community

Leadership

One of the major stumbling blocks to initiating a PLC is who will be in charge. Is it a "top-down" process with edicts issued from up on high by the principal or even superintendent? Is the leader secure enough in the talents of his/her staff to allow individuals and/or teams within the school or district to develop new and innovative strategies to help students learn? Or is it possible to have the best of both worlds where the administration and central offices set up parameters and proper staff development to allow the flourishing of creative strategies along with the time and resources to implement them?

While it is generally agreed that the formation of a PLC is implemented (at least in theory) by a principal or other administrator, it is up to the individual teachers and support staff in each individual school to make it work. However, proper leadership can more easily facilitate this process, help build shared knowledge about a PLC and its purpose, and help achieve the desired outcomes by actively promoting team engagement. How best to achieve this team engagement? It is simply not a matter of providing time to

collaborate, but requires a clear purpose, specific goals, and activities that give rise to those goals. According to DuFour (17-18), there are four steps that a leader can take toward team engagement:

- **Clarify essential outcomes.** This involves each team determining outcomes for each student to achieve. These can vary from school to school or district to district, but must align with state and district standards. All members are then expected to focus their daily work on helping students meet these outcomes.

- **Develop common assessments.** Each team develops at least four assessments per year given to ALL (emphasis added) students being taught. Teams are given the flexibility to determine the type and nature of these assessments (written tests, projects, portfolios, etc.).

- **Define proficiency.** The team is responsible for identifying a standard to be met by the student to be deemed proficient. For more subjective assessments, the team is required to define the criteria used to judge the student's work.

- **Analyze results and develop improvement strategies.** Each team is required to review student performance on the common assessments and develop and implement strategies to improve upon that level of performance. Individual teachers need to compare his/her group of students to the whole group, seek help from teammates if necessary, and offer constructive suggestions in areas where his/her students excelled.

Once teams are set and engaged, however, is the role of the principal or administrator finished? What are some steps that can be used to provide proper, but not overbearing, leadership, and what types of questions are appropriate for the administration to be asking of its teams? DuFour feels that periodic reviews with individual members and/or teams can be helpful. In these reviews, the administrator should ask about the plan for implementing the PLC process and specific steps, how will student mastery and team productivity be monitored, what modeling of student learning is taking place, what questions are guiding the team's work, are students not only being given extra time to master the material, but are teams being given adequate time to

collaborate during the school day, how are successes being celebrated, and how are the teams responding to obstacles and resistance (14-15).

Our educational leaders must not only ask "Will our school have a culture?" but "Will I make a conscious effort to define our culture?" It is the role of the leader of the school culture to help dispel some of the wrong assumptions currently flourishing in our school cultures, and replace them with new assumptions, expectations, and habits.

DuFour likens the leader of a school culture as the "cultivator of a garden." In this regard, he suggests that unless properly nurtured, the school garden will not bloom, and instead will be overrun by weeds. He describes the following as "weeds" that need to be pulled out by its roots (28-29):

Weed 1: We are not responsible for student learning. As educators, of course, we are responsible for our students' learning, regardless of what is happening in their lives outside the classroom. To make such excuses as "we need smaller class sizes," "we need more technology," "there is no support at home," simply diminishes our influence as educators and leads to cynicism and pessimism in those outside the educational community, including state and local legislators, business leaders, and parents.

Weed 2: We prefer to work by ourselves. No man is an island, and this is particularly true for educators. For decades, teachers have worked in relative isolation due to lack of time, scheduling problems, and tradition. It is the leader's role to engage in a systematic effort to allow staff the ability to share knowledge and information in an environment designed to promote collaboration.

Weed 3: We must protect our territory. This goes hand-in-hand with the isolation issue. In becoming territorial of our space and our methods, this leads to an "us

vs. them" mentality whereby teachers view each other as competitors, administration is viewed as an adversary, and parents are viewed as troublesome and meddling.

Weed 4: We focus on activity rather than results. Simply embracing the latest educational fad in reform leads to discontent, confusion, and frustration. A good leader will help insulate the staff from those who want to press their agendas and latest strategic reforms on the schools. A good leader will help collaborative teams focus not only on what the team is doing, but what the results of those activities are by helping to set targets and timelines (see SMART goals).

A good leader of a PLC will help his/her teams to be a "flourishing garden of continuous blooms," rather than an authoritative figure pressing his/her own agenda and ideas without team input and decision-making.

Conflict

Unlike the corporate environment where change is often regarded as something positive, change in a school community is often looked at with suspicion and fear, especially as it impacts educators' daily classroom activities. Principals and other administrators might also have a fear of confrontation and/or hostility, but is conflict necessarily a bad idea when trying to put together a PLC? In Achinstein's 2002 published study on conflicts within schools and teacher collaborative teams, she concluded that "teachers engaged in collaboration generate and at times thrive on conflict" (449-450). It should not be assumed that this is negative, but rather, conflict can be viewed as a vehicle for change. Achinstein identifies three concepts that provides a broader understanding of teacher professional communities: conflict, border politics, and

ideology (424). These will be looked at in view of how the teacher community deals with differences in these areas.

Conflict can be viewed as either an ongoing process or a situation. Achinstein describes these as “an event whereby individuals or groups clash, in which divergent beliefs and actions are exposed” or “a process whereby…groups come to sense that there is a difference…and…begin to identify the nature of their differences of belief or action” (425). Collaboration will eventually lead to conflict as not everyone, at every time, in every situation, will share the same point of view and/or opinion. True collaboration challenges people and groups to question the existing norms and autonomy, and forces critical reflection, often leading to a challenge of the status quo. This critical reflection often will lead to competing points of views and ideologies, resulting in new and/or ongoing conflicts within the community.

Achinstein defines border politics as identifying “community borders – negotiating which people and ideas belong” (426). While learning communities and the collaboration it is supposed to inspire is presumed to draw people together for a common mission, border politics can also be used to construct outsider status to groups and individuals as well. Border politics can be harmful as formulating conflict around a “common enemy” or can be used positively to intentionally consider outsider perspectives and reshape peoples thinking.

Finally, Achinstein speaks of ideology as “educational perspectives and commitments of teachers” (qtd. in Ball, 281). This encompasses their beliefs on student learning and outcomes, ideas regarding school reform, and thoughts on the relationship that exists between schools and society. The way that schools should be managed is not

central only to teachers, but also society in general; and these beliefs and ideologies are not always compatible or in agreement. This eventually comes back around to the idea of conflict and how it is resolved.

Achinstein's case study of two schools and their conflict resolution processes is enlightening. One school perceived itself as a tightly knit community of friends and as being emotionally close, focusing on consensus and a shared vision of increasing test scores (School #1). The other school welcomed dissention, provided opportunities for plenty of debate, and viewed education as a challenge to change the existing social system (School #2) (441). One would assume that the first school is able to meet their goal of insuring that all students learn, while the second would be in constant turmoil and conflict. In reality, the opposite happened. School #1 had set up borders which reduced conflict by simply excluding those teachers who were "not with the program." Jokingly, one teacher stated that "…we took those who disagreed and shot them" (431). While being somewhat facetious, this statement demonstrates how the system in School #1 is set up with boundaries and unless one conforms, one will be forced to leave. In contrast to the "all children can learn" philosophy, these teachers were quick to blame the home environment, outside influences, or even the student him/herself, for those students who were not succeeding academically or behaviorally. These teachers rarely reflected critically as to their role in the students' inability to succeed. Those teachers who attempted to look inward at themselves or raise concerns as to how to best help these students, eventually left the school. Conflict was at a minimum at this school because of its ability to have insiders and outsiders within their boundaries and their homogeneous approach to dealing with problems.

School #2, on the other hand, placed teacher responsibility for student achievement at the top of their reforms. This led to critical reflection in both teamwork and individual practices, with recognition for individual creativity and nurturing. This approach lends itself naturally to conflict about ideological and professional differences. A teacher at this school was quoted as saying "When conflict is brought to the surface, people are uncomfortable with it. That's when it becomes real…it will go somewhere" (436). Teachers at School #2 are uncomfortable and unsatisfied with the status quo, and in order to change it, are willing to risk conflict with administration, peers, students, and the community.

In summing up the differences in collaborative efforts between these two schools, Achinstein refers to their conflict stances as either "avoidance" (School #1) or "embracing" (School #2)(442). The border politics between these two schools also differ. School #1, in maintaining solidarity, excluded both "problem students" and those teachers who held a different viewpoint (443). School #2 had more open boundaries and encompassed a teacher community willing to expand its borders and diversity (444). Ideology between the two schools was "mainstream" at School #1 and "critical" at School #2 (445). The main difference between the philosophies of these two schools, however, always comes back to their way of dealing with conflict. At one (School #2), conflict held a critical position, opening up the school to positive changes and reform of the status quo, while School #1 attempted to minimize conflict at the risk of limiting dissent and/or different perspectives.

While educators (and people in general) tend to look at conflict as a negative or something to be avoided, true collaboration begins when people are willing to accept

responsibility and/or ownership, and are willing to listen to (and yes, even argue) opposing points of view. Special educators have always been at the center of conflict in their dealings with students. Special educators have conflicts with parents, administrators, social workers, general education teachers, and even the students themselves, in attempting to do what is best for the student. Special educators have never been able to just sit back and say "this is way I've always done it, and will continue to do it" because the job does not lend itself to that type of thinking. A special educator is always critically reflecting on programs and methods that are most advantageous to the student. In the course of doing so, special educators have learned how to handle conflict in a manner that reduces or minimizes tensions and disagreements, and break through the status quo in a mature and non-destructive way. Administrators and general educators would be well advised to seek the advice of special educators when dealing with conflicts in their own professional learning communities.

Teacher Isolation

Another obstacle to PLCs is the tradition of teacher isolation. As a rule, a teacher is confined to his/her classroom following a tightly scheduled timetable. Rarely does the individual teacher get an opportunity to work with his/her peers in an attempt to improve their practice. With the focus on student learning and a mandate to achieve high test scores, the individual teacher is seldom provided the chance to view other classrooms and teachers and/or attend professional development, except on their own time. Administrators are under pressure to find time in the school day to build in collaborative time, but not at the expense of student instructional time. This sense of isolation leads teachers to focus simply on their own classroom instead of the overall picture. This

isolation also leads to a lack of shared knowledge regarding current and best practices, a lack of opportunity to share successes and failures with peers, and a tendency of teachers to view collaboration as a threat to their autonomy. Often, teachers are so accustomed to working in isolation, that a collaborative atmosphere becomes a threat.

Teacher isolation is an anathema to a PLC. Since the basic premise of a PLC is collective inquiry, reflective discussion, and collaboration, teacher isolation becomes impossible in a building where a true PLC exists. Therefore, creating this collaborative atmosphere has often been described as "the single most important factor" (qtd. in DuFour 61) for a successful school improvement plan. However, care must be taken not to simply "throw teachers together" in an attempt to build a collaborative atmosphere. Teams can be structured in many different ways, such as grouping all grade level teachers together, all teachers teaching the same course (i.e., all math teachers, all science teachers, etc.), vertical teams (i.e., K-2/3-5, 9-10/11-12, Spanish I-IV, etc.), interdisciplinary teams, and/or similar responsibility teams. Special educators can fit easily into any team structure decided upon. At the elementary level, they would easily fit into the group or grade level that requires the most assistance; at the middle school, special educators fit easily into a team-teaching situation, and at the high school, special educators fit easily into team teaching situations or similar responsibility teams. It will be up to the principal and/or administrator, with input from all teachers, including special educators, to decide how best to formulate teams for their individual school or building.

Judith Little's research takes a look at what she refers to as "the optimistic premise of professional community" (914) made up of collective capacity, individual development, and a change in practice. She defines teacher learning communities as

"groups [that] demonstrably reserve time to identify and examine problems of practice; they elaborate those problems in ways that open up new considerations and possibilities; they readily disclose their uncertainties and dilemmas and invite comment and advice from others; and artifacts of classroom practice (student work, lesson plans, and the like) are made accessible" (938). Her study of three different teacher-led groups, however, found a lack of DuFour's SMART goals. These collaborative groups (a writing, math, and literacy group) met weekly, but were consumed by clock-watching, a tendency to get off-track from the original focus of the meeting, and a lack of measurable and results-oriented goals. While some time was spent on instructional practices in the classroom, most were consumed by discussions of "being behind" in the curriculum, and how to bring everyone to the same point. Little found in her study that closely held habits coincided with the "aha" moments, and the desire to look at one's practices in a critical and reflective way worked against the time pressures to "simply move on" (940). As Little's study indicates, simply putting together a group of teachers in a collaborative situation, without proper guidelines and stated outcomes or goals, results in staff or department meetings as we know them.

So how best to move teachers out of their isolation and into truly collaborative, goals-oriented teams? It is the role of the leader (principal, administrator) to set out the advantages for teachers working collaboratively. DuFour cites several benefits to working collaboratively: teachers are able to expand their level of expertise, reduction in fear of risk-taking, gains in student achievement, reinforcement of school culture and improvement initiatives, and increased ownership in decision-making (61). Care must be taken, however, to not allowing the organization of teams to become an end on to itself,

rather than the means to an end. DuFour speaks to group IQ wherein "a group can be no 'smarter' than the sum of the strengths of individual members, but it can be 'dumber' if its internal workings don't allow members to share their talents" (61). Teachers need to be specifically advised as to the advantages of working collaboratively, and not simply using collaborative time to vent and/or discuss other issues unrelated to student achievement.

According to DuFour, there are specific steps the leadership can take to insure high-performing teaming with a high group IQ. These are:

- **Build time into the school day and year for collaboration.** There exists creative ways to solve the time issue whereby student instruction is minimally affected.

- **Clarify the purpose and products of collaboration.** It cannot be reiterated enough that there must be specific expectations and goals set out, including objectives, common assessments, data analysis, and review of material to see where changes can be made.

- **Have teams set their operating procedures and protocols.** For example, how will the team operate (time, place), what will determine consensus, how will effectiveness be measured, and how will conflict be resolved?

- **Insistence on specific, measurable performance goals.** These will force the group to work together as a team (61-62).

While teachers often speak of having to be flexible and open-minded, when it comes to critically reflecting on their own teaching practices and methods, they often fall short. In order to work collaboratively, teachers will have to put aside their fears of losing autonomy or "someone having a better idea" (and automatically assuming that means their own idea was no good and/or not feasible) and work towards the goal of student achievement. Breaking out of this pattern of isolation requires a sustained and concentrated effort. This means making a conscious attempt at being non-judgmental

and keeping an open mind to new ideas and/or suggestions. Collaboration does not end at simply the formation of teams. True collaboration occurs when the group is no longer isolated, has set agreed upon outcomes with measurable results, develops common assessments so all students can be judged fairly, analyzing the results of those assessments, and making changes to instructional methods when the results are not what was desired and/or expected. Student learning and achievement is at the center of all collaborative efforts by teachers, and no one teacher can or should do it alone.

While there are obviously some serious barriers to overcome in formulating a PLC, it is not only NOT impossible, but is something that every school should eventually attempt to undertake.

Overcoming Barriers to a Professional Learning Community

It appears obvious that there are two major barriers to be overcome in formulating and implementing PLCs: a lack of strong and directed leadership and ineffective staff development. The other barriers, such as teacher isolation, conflict, and lack of time and resources, can all be avoided by proper implementation of good leadership and strong professional development.

Strong and Directed Leadership

Superintendents and principals have a fine line to walk in implementing PLCs in their district and school. Oftentimes leaders feel they must choose between “Option A” (their idea of what the PLC must look like and operate) or “Option B” (allowing the staff to completely take control of and having differences between schools). A truly innovative leader, however, will be able to take the best of both Option A and Option B, and combine them (and not necessarily 50/50) to formulate a PLC that is most effective

for that building. The effective leader will help define the necessary parameters, but allow their staff the autonomy to effectively run the day-to-day operations of accomplishing the stated goals.

Another failure of effective leadership is the belief that consensus means unanimity. If a group waits for everyone to agree on every single proposal before it can be enacted, nothing will ever get accomplished. The effective leader will set a definition of consensus which should include at least the following criteria: 1) all points of view have been heard, and 2) the will of the group is evident, even if all parties fail to agree (DuFour 14). Even those parties who fail to totally agree with a proposal or course of action will still be required to follow it.

While the leader can set the parameters and boundaries of what is to be done, periodic reviews are necessary by the leader to be sure that the teams are meeting their goals and objectives. These meetings can occur in small group settings or individually with leaders of the various teams. Some of the areas that should be covered in these meetings are:

- **Planning** – What is the team doing to implement the PLC process? What steps are being planned and when will they be implemented?
- **Monitoring** – What strategies are being developed to monitor student mastery? How about team productivity? How will these things be assessed?
- **Modeling** – How is the team modeling a focus on student learning and its commitment to collaboration?
- **Driving questions** – What questions has the team determined to guide their work?
- **Allocating time** – What steps are being taken for the team to meet collaboratively during the school day? What steps are being taken to

provide additional instruction time for student learning during the school day?

- **Celebrating** – How are you celebrating your work and progress?
- **Confronting** - What resistance and obstacles are being met and how has the team responded? (DuFour 15, 17)

Scott LaFee takes the following look at some superintendents who have successfully implemented PLCs in their districts:

Les Omotani, West Des Moines Community School District (Iowa). Omotani's basic premise of a PLC is that "a learning community is saturated with caring" (6). A key aspect of his district's PLC is getting to know the students and building a trusting atmosphere between students and teachers, the teachers themselves, and the school and community. The district has been able to foster this caring atmosphere through extensive staff development of everyone from the bus drivers and custodial staff to the administrative offices. Omotani states that "being a superintendent in a learning community is not about ordering change, but being a part of something larger than yourself" (7).

Joni Burgin, Grantsburg School District (Wisconsin). After a bitter and nasty contract negotiation, Burgin saw the need for the district to rebuild a structure of trust and mutual understanding. In her first step to formulating a PLC, she wanted to avoid the typical development program wherein the belief is people can do whatever they want if they just learn enough or try hard enough. Therefore, Burgin began by implementing a program whereby a person is valued for their strengths and what they can bring to the table (StrengthsFinder). This program allows people to focus on developing their

maximum potential based upon their strengths instead of trying to fix something that cannot be fixed (7).

Vicki Phillips, Lancaster School District (Pennsylvania). Phillips is another superintendent who had trust issues in her district. Her first step was to immediately expand professional development programs, allow teachers to do site visits, and form teacher networks for every subject. Some schools were restructured so that there were "schools within schools" to allow for a more nurturing and trusting atmosphere with the students. Phillips also has brought the larger community into the learning community, including businesses and families (8).

Scott Staska, Rocori School District (Minnesota). When Staska took over, he was already in a district with high expectations and academic excellence. He did, however, decide to focus on three basic areas: 1) high student achievement; 2) meeting the state's stringent graduation requirements; and 3) professional development. Because staff development is a difficult thing to measure, this issue was changed in many different ways, such as expanding the days for professional development, forming summer academies for teachers, and the requirement that all staff develop annual self-improvement plans (9).

Richard DeLorenzo, Chugach School District (Alaska). Aside from the daunting physical size of the school district (encompassing 22,000 square miles), the fact that only 231 students are served by nine teachers, only one Chugach student in 19 years had ever graduated from college, and staff turnover exceeded 50%, DeLorenzo realized that he could not simply begin a plan of instituting small steps at a time; he undertook a complete fundamental change of the district. The old system of credit hours and grade levels was

thrown out (after obtaining a state waiver) in favor of an approach focusing on individual student achievement. While some students reached high school proficiency as early as 14 years old, others met the final requirements at age 21. In the past five years, test scores have dramatically risen, along with several students from the district who have graduated from college. DeLorenzo credits an empowered staff that felt valued and were able to implement new ideas, even if they later proved wrong. He stated that his role was to ask questions, especially "what is the right thing to do?" The staff then took over from there (11-12).

In a personal interview with an administrator in a local school district who is attempting to implement a PLC, he feels that the primary focus must be on student learning as opposed to the collaboration of teachers. In a pilot program in this district, the school has implemented a guided study program wherein a freshman or sophomore who is failing three or more classes is paired with a junior or senior peer mentor/tutor. This guided study program takes place during one period a day, everyday. There are currently 28 students in this program. As of the last card marking, two of the students' grades went down, two stayed the same, but 24 of the students increased their grades. While one of the departments (History) recently completed a common assessment on a specific unit, the school is primarily using the district benchmark assessments as the common assessment. When asked if special education students were part of this guided study program, he stated that because special education students have a Learning Skills class on a daily basis, it was felt that this program would be more beneficial to those general education students who were struggling.

When asked about the collaboration aspect of a PLC, this administrator felt that due to contract restrictions of the teachers, additional time for collaboration between teachers cannot be found during the school day. In the team taught classes (where a large number of special education students are included in a general education class), there is also no time for collaboration between these teachers unless they choose to do so on their own time. The district is currently considering moving to a seven-period day next year throughout all the district high schools. This would allow the schedule to fit in more guided study classes, but would lead to even less time available for the teachers for collaborative purposes. It appears that because of the way the labor contract is written, at least in this district, PLCs might be difficult to effectively formulate and implement, unless teachers are willing to collaborate on their own time.

It is up to the leader to get the group together, help them formulate a vision or mission for the group as a whole, and then set defined boundaries or parameters for the outcomes and goals that the group wishes to meet. A good leader will then step out of the way and allow the people in the trenches to develop how best to meet those goals. A good leader will have his/her pulse on the group and make sure, through small group meetings, individual conferences, etc., that the group has the time and resources to achieve their necessary goals. If the group is having problems, it is up to the leader to come up with some ways to avoid and/or solve some of the obstacles in the way. It is not the role of the leader, however, to tell the group how best to achieve their goals of student learning and mastery.

Professional Staff Development

Teacher professional days or teacher workshop days have become synonymous with what the community views as "just another teacher day off" and what most teachers view as a big waste of time, learning another strategic implementation that will have no effect on them in the classroom. Teachers are now required to undergo a predetermined amount of professional development hours in order to keep their teaching certificates current. Do these staff development days or workshop sessions really make a difference in the ways teachers instruct in the classroom or are they simply a method whereby teachers can receive their continuing education credits? In a Professional Learning Community, staff development is based on research-based practices that teachers teach and share with each other. What a novel idea for staff development – teachers teaching teachers! Schmoker found several benefits of teachers teaching the practice of teaching, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Higher quality solutions to instructional problems
- Increased confidence among teaching staff
- An increased ability to support one another's strengths and to accommodate weaknesses
- More systematic assistance to beginning teachers
- The ability to examine an expanded pool of ideas, methods, and materials not normally readily available (430-31).

According to Schmoker, the failure of these expensive and elaborate professional development workshops is all but guaranteed by the lack of follow-up support or any meaningful attempts to monitor implementation (430). He further states that it is common practice to evaluate staff development on the basis of high participation rates and high levels of teacher satisfaction, and that district leaders rarely question if

participation leads to changes in either practice or improvement in student achievement (430).

In a PLC, staff development is geared specifically towards meeting the goals and outcomes as determined by the teams. In order to do so, staff development must be built around collaborative exchange in which all the teachers work together to reflect on their practice, exchange ideas, and share strategies. This is completely the opposite of the typical "sit and get" sessions of teacher workshops and seminars wherein the participants sit by passively and learn from the so-called experts. Teachers cannot simply be arranged to meet or attend and that scrutiny and changes of teaching practices will automatically transpire. Oftentimes at staff development workshops, teaching is rarely discussed. These sessions can often degenerate into more negative talk and complaints about lack of time and resources, problems with students' habits and motivation, and lack of support by everyone from the administration to the community at large.

Schmoker speaks to the differences between learning communities and workshops by focusing on the culture of dependency that the educational world has fallen into (87). Instead of relying on each other or making a team-based effort to change instructional practices and/or outcomes, everyone from administrators to teachers are endlessly searching and waiting for that one perfect research or staff development program to come along. Schmoker suggests that instead of waiting, teachers can and should take it upon themselves to share his/her methods and successes with colleagues. Mere sharing does not made the grade; teachers have to continuously help one another to separate poor instructional practices from effective ones.

Instead of following the linear approach of "sit and get" workshops, Klingner states that special education researchers have focused and led the way in providing long-term support for their staff development programs as well as including teachers as collaborators (249). Once again, student outcomes are a driving force in shaping these plans. Klingner's study shows that successful efforts were facilitated when researchers:

- Ensure that there is feasibility and fit of the practice in teachers' classrooms
- Demonstrate the general value of the practice, along with its potential for improving student performance
- Help teachers understand how the new practice is different from what they have been doing
- Provide coaches and mentors to work with teachers
- Maintain open lines of communication with school personnel
- Provide materials and other resources

These results show that when proper long-term support is provided, teachers are able to see the relevance to their own classroom, develop a sense of ownership, and are better able to promote new methods in their classrooms for longer periods of time. Klingner goes on to state that those barriers which teachers cite more often than not as hindering implementation are: lack of time, inadequate support from administrators, lack of materials, high-stakes testing, pressure to cover content, a mismatch between teacher style and practice, and lack of an in-depth understanding of the practice (249).

Gersten, et al, noted six principles that can help break down these barriers: 1) **Reality** – the feasibility and fit of the practice to the classroom; 2) **Scope** – if the practice is too broad or radical, then it is overwhelming; conversely, if the practice is too narrow, it is felt to be trivial; 3) **Technical** – amount of feedback and support teachers receive; 4) **Conceptual** – support is more likely if the significance of the new practice is understood; 5) **Linking changes in teaching to student learning** – the better the students perform,

the more likely the teacher is to use it; and 6) **Collegial support networks** – the ability to get sustained support from researchers, principals, and other teachers to use and continue the practice (qtd. in Klingner 249). All of these six principles can be found in a properly directed PLC. A primary objective of a PLC is to allow teachers the time and resources to meet as a group and share their knowledge and information, all in the name of improving student learning.

Mycue has developed a model of teacher professional development known as a Professional Circle, geared towards self-development while reducing teacher isolation and increasing collaboration. These Professional Circles can fit well into a PLC model as making up parts of the collaborative teams. She states the following guidelines as being helpful:

Planning Stage

- Bring together a homogeneous group (special education, grade-level, department)
- Determine how to disseminate information to potential group members
- Keep the number of participants manageable (8-12 members)
- Plan for a one or two-hour, weekly or bi-weekly, meeting

Beginning Stage

- Begin with introductions
- Focus on collaboration and teacher growth and development
- Discuss appropriate ground rules (e.g., confidentiality, etc.)
- Plan for facilitating group work rather than leader-directed activities

Working Stage

- Plan ahead
- Use short opening and closing exercises
- Stay on track, but be flexible
- Plan for on-going self-evaluation

Closing Stage

- Allow time to wrap up
- Offer each member the chance to share (30-31)

Because of the role collaboration plays in developing and maintaining a PLC, it is absolutely imperative that staff/professional development be geared towards developing those collaborative skills in a non-judgmental and trusting environment. Professional Circles are but one way of doing so. Staff development activities must change from being a "top-down" type of activity to one that focuses and assists the classroom teacher in collaborative skills necessary to improve academic outcomes for all students.

Special Education and the Professional Learning Community

Special educators have always had their own professional learning community inside of their individual districts and schools. Special educators have always had to collaborate with everyone from the business community (in the case of transition activities) to the students themselves, on a very personal level. Of all the teaching professions, special educators are probably the least isolated group of teachers, and therefore, can bring a perspective and talent to the collaborative teams that might be missing. Can a general educator improve his/her practice if given an opportunity to participate in collaborative professional development activities directed at improving instruction for students with disabilities? The initial response is to say "of course." After all, any instructional method that can assist a student with disabilities can undoubtedly assist a student without disabilities. However, is a general educator open to looking at some of these instructional strategies, and can a special educator make these strategies known without coming across as the person who has all the answers?

Brownell, et al, conducted a three-year study in which they utilized Teacher Learning Cohorts ("TLC") designed for teacher learning about instructing struggling students as well as students with disabilities. The TLC was designed as a professional

development process focusing on collaborative problem-solving and what teachers felt they needed to change based on research-based practices. The TLC provided: 1) concrete examples of strategies tailored to the classroom and instructional practices; 2) discussion as to how these strategies may be used; 3) repeated opportunities for collaborative discussions; and 4) gave feedback on the use of these strategies (171-172).

This study looked at the TLC learner outcomes on a continuum from high adopters (those who quickly and often incorporated new practices into their classrooms) to low adopters (less willing to try new practices and often struggled with the new strategy). They found the following five characteristics that influenced a teacher's willingness to adopt different strategies learned:

- **Knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy.** These teachers were consistently the most knowledgeable teachers. They taught in a systematic, engaging, and relevant way. As opposed to moderate or low adopters, they were able to give explicit answers that demonstrated their knowledge of how to reach struggling students (177).

- **Knowledge and beliefs about managing students.** High adopters realized that well-designed instruction, as well as teaching behavior, went hand-in-hand. They often used positive discipline to help students reflect on and change their behavior. Moderate and low adopters had a tendency to blame the student, or felt they had to be so focused on teaching content, that little time was left for teaching behavior (178-179).

- **Views of teaching and student learning.** High adopters had the highest student-focused views of instruction and were more quick to implement peer learning and cooperative strategies in their classroom. Low adopters tended to be more teacher-centered and/or held out working together as a "reward" (180).

- **Ability to reflect on students' learning.** The more reflective the teacher is, the more willing the teacher was to adopt new strategies and practices. Once again, moderate to low adopters tended to blame the student for their failure to learn (181).

- **Ability to adapt instruction.** The high adopters were always learning new ways of instruction and management and willing to share them with

> their colleagues. Low adopters had the most difficulty in adapting instruction unless support was provided or the practice required few changes to what they were already doing (181-182).

It is obvious from Brownell, et al's study that teachers are willing to learn of new strategies and instructional practices for their classroom, but implementing them is where the challenge comes in. Special educators have a toolbox of tricks to increase learning, aid in organization, and reduce behavioral problems in the classroom. The problem arises as to whether the general educator feels the information being provided is being brought forward in a non-judgmental, collaborative way, or whether their own instructional practice is being dismissed as ineffective and/or harmful. Brownell's findings hoped to show that teachers would benefit from meeting with peers and a skilled facilitator to examine problems and learn now to implement new strategies. However, their study showed a wide variety of teachers' responses to participation; some teachers acquired only one or two strategies while others utilized many, if not all. They felt their study showed how little power professional collaboration had for changing teacher practice (182).

Does this mean a PLC will ultimately fail if teachers are not willing to collaborate and implement new strategies? No, but it does mean that the leadership will have to play a key role in helping teams understand that this is a group process geared toward student learning and achievement, and how the team arrives there is immaterial – just that they do.

Implications for Special Educators in a PLC

How do special educators fit into a PLC? Unless a school or district is truly innovative, and all classes and/or grade levels are taught in a team-teaching situation, the

role of the special educator in a PLC must be careful not to be overlooked. Because of the collaborative skills that a special educator brings to the table, that teacher can fit well into most any team whether it be grade level, subject matter, or departmentalized. Middle schools have led the way in true team teaching; i.e., the special education teacher is part of a team that follows the same students throughout the year. This enables the special education teacher to not only help special education students, but also general education students who are struggling and might otherwise fall through the cracks. It also enables the special educator to bring instructional strategies into the classroom that the general educator might not be familiar with or think about using, but all students can benefit from its implementation.

A truly innovative strategy to integrate special educators into a PLC framework is through team teaching. While difficult to do at the elementary level where there might only be one special educator for the building, it is definitely feasible at the high school level, especially those looking at total inclusion of all students. Putting special education students into the general education curriculum not only allows them to make progress in the general education program, but provides opportunities to allow the development of functional skills (Schnorr, et al 11).

Schnorr, et al, suggests that in a typical class of 25 students, a maximum of six or seven students with disabilities be placed in this class. While twice the natural proportion of students within the general school population, the special educator is more likely to be available to participate in class as a co-teacher. Groups should also be kept as heterogeneous as possible; students with disabilities should include a variety of

disabilities, as well as a mix of average and/or high achievers, from the general student population (11).

In order to effectively team between special educators and general educators, collaboration and staff development has to play a role. In most situations, there is very little planning time allowed and often a disagreement on perceived level of responsibility for instruction and classroom management. Fennick and Liddy report that 48% of teachers in co-teaming situations have no mutual planning time scheduled on a daily basis and only 22% of the teachers had one or more hours of scheduled planning time during the week (235). In a PLC, team teachers would have time built into their school day to collaborate on instruction and assessment. This time is especially necessary since traditional classroom practices will now be replaced with inclusive practices. Both groups of teachers found release time, mentoring by a collaborative teacher, and student teaching in a collaborative class the most useful tools for preparation, but not provided (237).

Keefe and Moore found three major themes emerging from their study of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms at the high school level. These were: 1) the nature of collaboration; 2) roles of the teachers; and 3) outcomes for students and teachers (81). An important facet of collaboration for most teachers was the ability to choose their co-teacher and communication and compatibility between the teachers. Those teachers who were able to pair up by choice found communication easier, especially in viewing classroom responsibilities. Keefe and Moore also found that planning time was a problem, as well as classroom size that has a tendency to become larger in a team taught class (82). Due to a proper lack of education and preparation regarding co-teaching

situations, the role of the special education teacher was often murky, with no direction as to who should do what. Most teams settle into a division of roles whereby the general educator takes responsibility for the curriculum, planning, and large group instruction, with the special education teacher helping individual students and designing modifications (83). This lack of defined roles seem to lead to problems wherein the special educator is made to feel more like a teaching assistant than an actual teacher. The high level of expertise in content areas at the high school level can also prove to be a challenge for special educators in the classroom (Schnorr 12). According to Keefe and Moore, modifications to the curriculum and materials fall into the complete realm of the special educator (84). Interestingly, positive student outcomes were seen as a result of co-teaching by general education teachers more so than special educators. General educators felt that special education students in the team taught classes produced a higher quality of work and appeared to learn more (85). Special educators, on the other hand, while feeling most students benefit from being included in the general education classroom, were more ambivalent about some of their students being in so large a class and whether inclusion is always appropriate for every student all the time (85).

Team taught classes are an appropriate function in a PLC, particularly at the high school level. However, the two keys necessary to make this work are collaborative teams and professional staff development. Both of these components must exist for team teaching to be an effective tool used in the PLC. It is up to the leadership involved in the school or district PLC to make certain that these two primary components are the backbone of teams formed in the PLC.

Conclusion

Professional Learning Communities are not simply the latest new fad talked about in school reform. It is a proven, research-based strategy that has been proven to increase teacher collaboration and morale and more importantly, increase students' learning and achievement in the classroom. Implementing a PLC, however, is easier said than done. It requires a complete re-evaluation and implementation of how a school or district should operate. Contrary to how most schools operate, it is not a top-down procedure, whereby the superintendent or principal rains down edicts on those below and expects them to be followed. The largest and most important piece of a PLC is the collaboration between all parties, including those at the top. The role of the leader is to help set the vision and parameters for what the goals should be, help collaborative teams form, and provide the necessary tools, in both time and resources, for the teams to function effectively. The leadership role is more of a monitor to make sure all teams are functioning at the level expected and that the outcomes and goals are being reached, and if not, why not.

Not all the responsibility for an effective PLC, however, can or should be placed on the leadership. It is the role of the classroom teacher, that person who interacts with the students on a day-to-day basis and knows the students best, who has to be willing to make a major shift in the traditional thinking of the classroom teacher. No longer is being in isolation or territorial acceptable; the teacher must not only be willing to share their strengths and knowledge with others, but also must accept the strengths and knowledge of their peers. In the best interests of the students, teachers can no longer afford to work in a vacuum, disembodied from all that goes around them except for in

their own classroom. Teachers have a wealth of knowledge and information to share, and it is only fair that they share it with each other. In a true PLC, teachers are also part of the learning community, and that includes learning from each other.

The final responsibility for a PLC must also lie within the students and their families. Without support from the families and interest from the students in learning, all the determination and striving towards effective student outcomes will mean nothing. Students should be prepared to come to school ready to learn. If they have difficulties with the material, then the school and teachers will help; however, the family has a role to play at home in making sure that work is organized and completed, and following up on what is being done in the classroom.

When looking at what makes a PLC effective, the first and foremost item that stands out is collaboration – collaboration between the leaders and teachers, collaboration between the teachers themselves, collaboration between teachers and students and families, and collaboration between the school and its community. Without this element of collaboration, a PLC is destined to fail. Collaboration cannot be viewed simply as the parties getting together and having meetings. True collaboration occurs when teachers and staff are given adequate time to plan and interact with each other to formulate how best to increase student achievement. It occurs when the leadership truly listens to those in the classroom and provides opportunities for development and implementation of goals. It occurs when teachers and students make a connection and everyone feels valued and cared for based on who they are and what they can accomplish. It occurs when schools and families work together as true partners in helping each student be successful, even if it means educating families to what the schools and classrooms are doing.

Collaboration is that piece of the puzzle, when finally inserted in the right place, brings the whole picture of student achievement together. Successful goal setting, assessment, and achievement cannot be reached in a school or classroom without collaboration.

Special educators bring a special talent to a PLC established within a district or school. Special educators have been collaborating with others for years, and can help a team collaborate effectively through the use of their skills. With inclusion practices changing almost constantly, special educators can no longer afford to isolate themselves in their "special education world" any longer, and must begin to work effectively and efficiently with the general educators who also teach their students.

A PLC in a nutshell is a community of learners – from the principal to the staff who work and interact with students on any basis. A PLC in a school is tailor-made for a special educator. We are already utilizing a lot of these techniques and methods in our collaboration with others. Special educators bring a wealth of information and knowledge to a school interested in developing their own PLC. It is up to the leadership and other educators in the school to embrace them.

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