Laying Foundations for an Effective Professional Learning Community in A Primary SCHOOL: An action research study

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The subject matter of the research undertaken in this study, carried out following the award of a STEPS scholarship part-financed by the E.U.-European Social Fund, was to explore how the notion of professional learning communities (PLCs) might be introduced into a newly-developing primary school. Five dimensions characterise professional learning communities: shared beliefs, values, vision and goals; supportive and shared leadership; collective learning and application of learning; shared personal practice; and supportive conditions (Hord, 2004:7). Advocates of PLCs declare (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006:38) that they provide a framework of principles that concentrate the energy of an organisation towards the common goal of improving student achievement. This is done through facilitating learning for the entire community. Bolam et al. define it thus:

> An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning. (2005:2)

In recent decades, educational reforms have had one main aim: that of increasing student achievement (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006:7). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006:1) identify two pressures that drive today's schools: society's demand to produce students with the complex cognitive skills needed by the 'knowledge society' (Sahlberg and Boce, 2010:34) and a wish to address the issue of inequity so that all students achieve set standards (OECD, 2008:1). However, these two aspirations may or may not be compatible, most often depending on how policy-makers address reforms (Hargreaves 2003:14). Research to promote change and reforms thus focused on the important relationship between school organisation, teacher quality and student achievement (Robinson and Timperley, 2007). It is within this context that PLCs have been found to play a critical role (Hughes and Kritsonis, 2007). This topic is one of increasing importance because PLCs are considered as a dynamic model to improve the education systems in the next decade (Barber and Mourshed, 2009). It has particular relevance to new-start schools because it reports how at this stage culture responds to shaping on PLC characteristics. Thus, it was particularly exciting in this specific context as the culture of the researched school was in the making process where the aim was to put the school on track towards sound professional and educational principles that work to optimise learning.

The research took place at St. Paul's primary school (SPP, a pseudonym) which is a newly built extension of a well-established Catholic Church secondary school. It was in its initial stages of setting and shaping its culture and organisational structures. Therefore, this study aimed at guiding the school through an action research project to pilot the effective principles portrayed in the PLC research field. Since the study is action research, it is grounded in the applied research camp (OECD 2002: 78). However, that does not exclude, with careful empirical approaches, the opportunity to generate good theoretical research as part of the process (OECD 2002: 79).

The research context has seen the development of a vision through the concerted efforts of many educators. A number of professionals were involved in various structured and scheduled discussions that focused on issues such as formulating curricular ideas, pedagogies of learning, staffing requirements and identifying the logistical needs for the new school. Starting a year after the school opened its doors to the first cohort of students, this study aimed to carry out a review of the developments that have taken place till then, and to identify potential ways of nurturing those principles that will help the school develop into a PLC.

The Advent of PLC in Education

During the eighties, educators felt the need of regeneration and to move away from traditional schooling to improve 'accountability, collaborative environments and teachers' efficacy' (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006:7). Consequently, research set about scrutinising what was really effective in education and how learning can be sustained. This brought under scrutiny the link between student achievement, 'teacher quality, organisational and systemic change and reform' (Ibid:7).

By the turn of the 21st century, Senge (2000), had articulated a view of the workplace as a learning organisation for the business world which seemed to propose a solution for the sought after change in education (Feger et al., 2008:3). Hord referring to Senge (2000) states that:

> Senge's book promoted the idea of a work environment where employees engaged as teams, developing a shared vision to guide their work, operating collaboratively to produce a better product, and evaluating their output. (1999:1)

Senge's idea was supported by Sergiovanni's (1994) work on 'communities of learning'. Sergiovanni (1994) advocated the importance of a school adopting a sense of community, becoming more of a social rather than a formal organisation. He notes that 'success seems to be related to the fact that though substance differs, the schools have achieved focus and clarity and have embodied them in a unified practice' (Ibid.: 100). Other educational researchers were pooling evidence from the field (Astuto et al., 1994) and eventually the concept was refined to that of PLC by writers such as Hord (1997). While trying to avoid the pitfalls of new buzzwords that often pervade the educational lexicon, recently a new concept of 'intelligent school' has developed that expands on the same basic dimensions of PLC presenting them as multiple intelligences that may be fostered in schools (MacGilchrist et al., 2004).

The International and National Context

In many countries, research on PLC's dynamics is at a relatively early stage of development, even though evidence suggests that they have a positive impact on school improvement (Stoll et al., 2006:222). Various efforts can be noted especially in the English-speaking world (Stoll & Seashore Louis,2007:9) . In the USA, PLCs have been promoted as a way to facilitate school reforms and a means to manage the challenges of raising student achievement (Cormier and Olivier,2009:9). From their study on PLCs, Hughes and Kritsonis (2007) have found that schools that re-culture to PLC give evidence of improved student achievement. In Hong Kong, ACTEQ (2003:7) recommends that ' schools should be developed as professional learning communities' and that ' teachers' professional development should be regarded as an important force in school development' establishing the school as a PLC. Moreover, they state that 'teachers as professionals also have a responsibility to facilitate the professional growth and development of their colleagues', (Ibid.: 7). In England, it seems that the concept of PLC was also growing

in this last decade and that it presented ' a means of promoting school and system wide capacity building' (Bolam et al., 2005:10).

Meanwhile, in Malta, policy makers made a conscious effort to move away from a highly centralised and bureaucratic system to a wider participative and collaborative strategy among stakeholders (Bezzina, 2006:160). This vision aimed to empower members of staff in educational decision-making to determine the way forward and develop schools as learning organisations (Ibid.:160). Consequently, a number of schools in Malta started their journey towards implementing PLC principles (Bezzina & Testa 2005; Salafia 2003).

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

SPP school is a new primary school, which opened its doors to its first students in September 2011. At the initial stages of this research, the school admitted only two grades, namely grade 1 (5-6 year olds) and grade 4 (8-9 year olds), totalling to a school population of 150 students. During this phase, 30 staff members worked in the school's primary section comprising senior management, teachers, learning support assistants and support staff. In its second operative scholastic year, during which the research was sustained, the primary school's population doubled to 300 students. This was made up of 150 new students in grades 1 and 4, as well as the previous year's students who were promoted to grade 2 and grade 5 respectively. Consequently, the school also experienced the addition of new teaching, administrative and support staff.

SPP school is an extension to the extant secondary school. The secondary section had a positive school culture founded on Catholic communitarian values (QAD, 2010; Farrugia,2011). The leaders' vision was to have a whole-school approach to development and that a positive culture would embrace both sections. In order to strengthen this unitary vision the school organisation was established with one head acting as a principal with a deputy head for each section. It was envisaged that the new primary school would serve to strengthen the secondary section with innovative approaches.

The initiative to extend the school was as a result of one of the reforms in Maltese education (Cutajar, 2007), which established the importance of continuity from ages 5 to 16, and from the school's leadership objective of addressing learning difficulties at the earliest. In this context of innovation the school was still shaping its organizational structures and consolidating its principles and policies. It was within this context that the principles behind PLCs have been deemed central to this research, and thus positioned as the main aim of the study by the researcher who was also the primary school's Deputy Head.

SPP AND THE NATIONAL POLICIES

SPP, being a Catholic Church school falls under the country's Church schools directorate which works in collaboration with the country's education authorities. SPP enjoyed a great degree of autonomy on how to run the school compared to schools run by the state. However, it was still bound by the country's Education Act (1988) and the Church-state agreement of 1991 (Agreement on Church Schools, online). Despite of these binding documents, the school was free to establish its own mission statement, vision and educational policies.

The Research Questions

Five questions guided this research as the school embarked on this journey towards becoming a PLC:

1. What are the existing characteristics of a PLC as identified in literature and as applied to SPP school?

2. What is the readiness level of staff at SPP in relation to implementing the principles behind the PLC?

3. Which areas need to be addressed to enhance the school's internal capacity to become a PLC?

4. What marked developments take place within the action research period?

5. What are the leadership implications for the required changes?

Principles extracted from a review of literature guided the methodology to systematically attempt to answer the research questions in the chapters that follow.

The Nature of this Research

The investigation is guided by the principles of action research (Denscombe, 2007:122). The research aims at changing *'practitioners practices'*, their *'understandings of their practices'*, and the *'conditions in which they practice'* (Kemmis,2007:1). Action research was seen appropriate for this study as it is considered a good approach of combining theory and practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001:11). Moreover, in educational contexts it also helps to improve pedagogies, organisational structures and professional development of educators (Cohen et al., 2007:297).

Action research goes through cyclical or spiral models which are structured on planning, acting, observing and reflecting phases (McNiff et al.,1996:22). However, an auditing phase which unveils potential improvements precedes the planning phase. Accordingly, the school staff was audited through a PLC survey (Olivier et al., 2010:32) to reveal the strengths, weaknesses and readiness of the school professional culture. Areas needing strengthening were thus identified, and necessary changes introduced to support progress. Finally, focus groups and observations from critical friends reviewed the effect of any changes introduced during the research cycle to take stock of the developments. Consequently, the data gathered guided the new way forward to restart the process again. In this research process, more than one line of intervention was studied.

Marked Developments That Took Place Within The Action Research Period

PLC takes time to develop

This research supported and indeed justified, even more in the context of a new school, what Hargreaves advises that:

Strong and sustainable PLCs cannot be rushed or forced. They can only be facilitated and fed. Professional learning communities take time. Like virtue or community in general, they cannot be mandated and legislated by imposed and over confident design. They can only be built and developed through strengthened relationships. (2007:188)

Whilst starting on a strong footing and with the right approaches was critical, one has to acknowledge that there was a lot to be established at this initial phase. The numbers of new teachers and support staff to be inducted in the school's culture was in itself a challenge. The 'ephemeral' effect of the school culture (Deal and Peterson, 1998:28) in this context was magnified and makes the PLC undertaking more challenging as it was 'constructed and reconstructed through the collective articulation of beliefs' (Bates 1992, as cited in Bates 2006:158).

Integrated Professional Culture and PLC

This research has unveiled an interesting dimension to inform educational research. In the first year, a number of recruited veteran classroom teachers resisted the collaborative culture projected from the start by the school leaders. A high veteran to novice ratio had originally been aimed at achieving some knowledge base as a starting school (Stoll and Louis, 2007a:4). Unfortunately, it did not work as envisioned. Before the second scholastic year, the challenging teachers left and made room for new novice teachers.

The result was that the novice teachers participated 'from the start, building and defining a school's professional culture' (Kardos et al., 2001:256). Moreover, the school, in this phase of great demand, benefitted from the 'idealism and energy' that characterises *novice-oriented professional* cultures (Kardos and Moore Johnson, 2007:2085). This proved to be more productive and easier to align with the school's values and vision of a collaborative culture. Moreover, all the new recruits and the rest of the previous year's teachers created an *integrated professional culture* (Ibid.,2007:2088) where novices interacted as par with veterans, whilst recognising their needs as beginners. Consequently, a shared responsibility for the school and its students was developed among teachers, a key aspect of a PLC.

These incidents, in this particular context, did not support the theories put forward by Talbert (2010:558) who purported that teacher turn over 'undermines social cohesion' and that 'schools with high proportion of beginning teachers… , are handicap in their knowledge resource' thus hindering PLC progression. On the contrary, at SPP the energy and motivation of new teachers, together with support from the SLTs and experienced teachers, eased these drawbacks and were turned into opportunities. Facilitation and support was continuous to avoid what Hargreaves (2007:183) warns against as the risk of 'driving teachers to distraction – away from the passion of teaching and learning in classrooms and enriched relationships with children….'.

Starting from Practitioners' Knowledge

Practitioners' knowledge was always the starting point for every decision taken to generate change. This made every stakeholder feel confident and esteemed and added greater professional efficacy and motivation. Utilising capacity to build capacity (Fullan, 2003:7) at SPP not only gave more confidence and efficiency but added ownership leading to a deeper sense of leadership. Two strategies were employed to tackle decisions. The *Teaching Learning Cycle* (Cowan, 2010:58) was introduced for the weekly curriculum meeting which involved; the study of the problem, selecting a strategy, planning the way forward, the implementation, the analysis, and finally a decision on the adjustments that were deemed necessary. This strategy placed the teachers and support staff as co-contributors in the action research process, hence giving them more leadership in curriculum decisions. Subsequently, the mentor adopted the GROW model (Whitmore, 2002:56) to coach and mentor teachers in tackling problems in instruction. Both strategies were aimed at starting from what practitioners know and progressing to action research

(Fullan 2002:18), thus creating a supporting structure of regeneration through the school's internal capacity (Morrissey, 2000:10).

PLC and External Facilitator

One of the common strategies acclaimed by administrators as making a difference in their schools is the identification and hiring of 'skilled teacher educators and facilitators outside the system to support PLC improvement efforts' (Talbert, 2010:564). This research validates this strategy as the external mentor appointed at SPP was well accepted and perceived as less threatening due to the fact that he was from outside the school community and also a foreigner. Another important factor that helped the mentoring process was that the suggestions forwarded by the mentor and the approach adopted were very practical and relevant (Roehrig et al., 2008:696); contrasting, according to the participants, with theories taught at university level.

Leaders' Emotional Intelligence and PLC

Fullan (2002:18) states that in complex times emotional intelligence is a must. In the context of SPP where, due to the growth of the school, change was a constant, working on relationships was imperative. Although, distributed leadership is an important aspect in a PLC and improved at SPP, staff still conveyed the emotional need of a leader from whom to get direction and support when needed. Leaders at SPP worked relentlessly to create positive relationships amongst staff. They were sensitive to their emotional states and at times were inspiring in a number of situations (Ibid.:18). This disposition from the part of the SLT helped to foster trust and a greater sense of community among staff, facilitating growth as PLC.

Communicating the PLC model

The PLC model was never mandated but only verbally communicated, explained and modelled as Talbert (2010:560) advised. This strategy made participants feel comfortable and free to pace their efforts in line with the PLC principles without feeling unduly pressured. However, a finding worth noting is that certain benefits should be regularly communicated and encouraged. It transpired from this research that although certain supportive conditions for collaboration were explained and embedded in the school's organisational structure, the majority of teachers failed to benefit from them.

In addition, communicating success is motivating and leaves a positive impact. During the research period SPP was awarded a Bronze-level CPD mark established by the hired training company sponsored by the EU programme. This and other students' achievements were consistently communicated in recognition of the effort and work done by the staff (Talbert, 2010:567). Consequently, it diffused a motivational effect in all the community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE REQUIRED CHANGES TO PLC

The context of this starting school was a combination of building and changing a school culture. Thus, this section focuses on the critical issues of leadership that underpin the whole of this study. Building the culture of a starting school involves a culture change needed to harmonise the vision of the school with that of new staff that comes with preconceived beliefs. In this context, a culture of collaboration was designated since research evidence that it generates positive outcomes in achievements and critical to

establish a PLC (DuFour, 2004:1). The following recommendations emerge from this action research intended to lay foundations for a PLC in the context explained above leaders benefit:

- from emotional intelligence and need not be 'the smartest in an IQ sense but are those who combine intellectual brilliance with emotional intelligence' (Fullan 2001:71) in a context of a culture building and change.
- by diligently modelling and communicating PLC and avoid mandating (Talbert, 2010:567) and the risk to 'turn into odd-on teams that are driven by data in cultures of fear that demand instant results' (Hargreaves ,2007:183).
- from perseverance as PLCs needs time to develop (Kruse and Seashore Louis, 2007:115) as ' the more patient, less deliberate modes are particularly suited to making sense of situations that are intricate, shadowy or ill defined' (Claxton ,1997:3 as cited in Fullan, 2001:122).

- by pacing and prioritising changes as one 'cannot press on relentlessly for more tested achievement by burning our teachers and leaders out' (Hargreaves, 2007:191), since PLCs needs time and continuous adjustments.

- by starting from the practitioners' knowledge (Earl and Hanney, 20011) as this imparts confidence, efficacy and collective creativity (Hord, 1997:10) -'the collective ability of people, in an organisation, to learn their way out of trouble, and forward into the future'(Hargreaves, 2007:185).

- if they engage an external facilitator as a support and change agent (Hill and Crevola,2003:398) where 'with strong interpersonal, organisational and communication skills, [s/he] is the linchpin that holds the implementation together'(Cooper , 1998:12).

- by balancing their judgement between professional responsibility and maturity of recruits (Hargreaves, 2003:163) rather than level of knowledge base, and select individuals who can 'make connections between the priorities of the school and their individual personal, professional and collective identity and commitment' (Day et al., 2005:575).

The praxis paradigm adopted by this research where 'theory and practice, research and development, thought and action' (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001:15) were associated to develop a culture of PLC, definitely provided interesting results. The work has progressed on two critical fronts – first in starting a PLC and secondly on how that impacts on the school leadership. SPP culture emerged as showing evidence of implementing a number of PLC dimensions that create a positive learning environment for teaching staff and that for the short research period the leadership learned a number of important lessons that strengthened its efficacy. The next step to attempt to validate that PLC foundations are educationally comprehensive would be to investigate if these dimensions subsequently result in improved learning and achievement for all stakeholders especially the students. This would involve a whole new set of research challenges.

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