Learning among colleagues: teacher community and the shared enterprise of education

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In both Norwegian and Hebrew, the verbs “to teach” and “to learn” are etymologically inseparable. Teaching and learning in these two highly distinct tongues are two sides of the same pedagogical coin. One who teaches is also one who learns. Yet teachers are rarely—on a daily basis—afforded formal or informal opportunities for learning. And teacher education programs do not always prepare future teachers to also be future learners. Most importantly—for the purposes of this chapter—too few teachers are adequately prepared to learn from one another, and too few schools create the conditions where learning from colleagues might be possible. As Seymour Sarason famously noted in his classic 1971 text, The Culture of School and the Problem of Change, teachers cannot possibly create and sustain productive learning environments for students when no such conditions exist for teachers. What do cultures of shared learning, dialogue, deliberation, debate, and community look like? How do such contexts affect teachers and students? How can we prepare future teachers to develop and benefit from professional interactions with colleagues?

This chapter reviews past and present conceptions of teacher professional communities as they relate to teacher learning. It conceptualizes teacher colleagues as a specific context for and resource to teacher learning. I emphasize empirical work that grounds these conceptions in actual teacher practice—in particular, the ways studying teacher practices exposes embedded values and competing ideologies. In what follows, I provide a brief history of these conceptions and review the multiple goals and enduring tensions inherent in studying and implementing teacher learning communities in practice.

A note about words

Many authors observe that terms such as “teacher community,” “teacher professional community,” and “professional learning community” are often used interchangeably in the literature that addresses teachers’ work in schools (Furman & Mertz 1997; Little & Horn 2006). Talking about teachers’ collaborative and collective work in schools, therefore, is slippery work. To make matters more complicated, these same terms are sometimes used to describe teachers’ work outside of schools, in professional networks and summer workshops. For example, the professional community of English teachers and the Portfolio Assessment teacher community can both boast a constituency concerned with teaching and learning. Furthermore, “professional” is used in varied ways. For example, some use the term specifically to distinguish technical “training” that treats teachers like mindless rule-followers from respectful and thoughtful teacher education and practice (as in the professionalization of teaching). A number of authors also delineate friendly conversation from deeper dialogues aimed at mutual learning. Brian Lord (1994), for example, draws the distinction between conviviality and critical
colleagueship. Getting along with one’s colleagues, he argues, is not the same as seeing colleagues as a resource in the ongoing study and improvement of teaching and learning. Similarly, Lima (1997), and Jarzabkowski (2002) wrestle with the differences and similarities between teachers’ friendships and their professional relationships.

In this chapter, I am concerned primarily with those interactions among teachers that are related to teacher learning. I use the term “teacher professional community” to designate a group of teachers engaged in professional endeavors together (those endeavors oriented specifically around teacher work). I will use “professional learning community” and “teacher learning community” to designate a subset of the former group—those specifically focused on learning with and from colleagues, generally within a school site.

TEACHING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

In the past three decades, assumptions about teaching and learning have changed substantially. Shifts in cognitive science and new theories of teaching and learning altered the way researchers and practitioners see the process of education unfolding. At the classroom level, researchers began to consider the ways students construct knowledge in relation to their surrounding contexts (e.g. Bruner, 1996; Gardner, 1985; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). And teacher educators began to emphasize the social and interdependent nature of teacher learning. Communities of learners became a popular way to think about not only students learning together but teachers collaborating as well (Barth, 1990; Sizer, 1992). Hoping to overcome the professional isolation so common in what Dan Lortie described as “egg-crate” schools (Lortie, 1975)—where teachers are largely isolated from one another in their own classrooms—reformers began to advocate for new school structures and teacher practices that recognize the importance of learning within communities. By focusing on the environment in which teachers do their work, these reformers hoped to foster collegiality and increase professional dialogue.

The traditional view of schools as formal organizations began to give way, at least in some reform circles, to the notion of community. Research began to provide some evidence that examining schools as communities highlights “strategically different aspects of the school environment and fundamentally different levers for policy” (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 80; also Sergiovanni, 1994a). “The community metaphor,” writes McLaughlin, “draws [policy] attention to norms and beliefs of practice, collegial relations, shared goals, occasions for collaboration, problems of mutual support and mutual obligation” (1993, p. 81). By attending to teacher professional communities, researchers argued, we gain an understanding of the ways in which teachers’ relationships structure their work and their lives in schools. By the mid-1990s, creating professional conditions more conducive to a sense of collective mission and responsibility had become an essential component of many local, state, and national school reform efforts (Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman, 1995; Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1992).

But while the goal of teacher learning within a community of colleagues is shared by many educators, the specifics of what these communities look like and of how to create and sustain them remain varied. The visions of teacher professional community implicit in school reform literature are numerous and diverse. Some variations are a matter of emphasis, creating complementary sets of lenses through which analysts can better study teacher communities in practice. Other visions, however, constitute competing ideologies about both the aims and means of professional learning communities in schools. The
inability to pin down specific definitions of teacher collaboration and exchange within a professional community comes in part from the elusive nature of the term “community” itself.

The ambiguity of community

The anthropologist Herve Varenne (1986), while studying American conceptions of society and social diversity, concluded that there is tremendous theoretical confusion over notions of community. He found it difficult to reconcile ideals of individualism and community that coexist in the social psyche. Indeed, understanding the complexities inherent in these terms has been an ongoing project for more than two centuries. Contemporary examples of the tensions between individualism and community and between the borders of various communities abound. The readers of this book are undoubtedly part of multiple overlapping communities each of which has stronger or weaker bonds across numerous varied dimensions such as common beliefs, norms of interaction, participation, and space for dissent. Readers might be part of a “community of scholars,” a “community of teacher educators,” “the University of Pennsylvania community,” a “tenants community,” and their local neighborhood community, to name just a few. For educators, the problems of conceptualizing community are multiplied. Necessarily occupying the space between theory and practice, researchers and reformers who study teacher professional communities often find conceptions of community rooted in practice to be oversimplified and those rooted in theory to be less than entirely convincing (Strike, 1999). Do three, four, or five characteristics constitute a way to identify communities, to verify that a particular alliance of individuals is or is not a community? Such a characterization would construe community as a static entity, and few social analysts would be comfortable with such a simplification. Many of the ethnographic accounts of teacher professional communities in practice go a considerable distance in providing a window into understanding the nature of experiences and interactions (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 2003). But while the features commonly identified by social theorists provide a common language for recognizing communities and their constitutive elements, they do not define the community with generalizable rigor. More importantly, identifying these features rarely convinces others—especially those resistant to these reforms—of the benefits of community. Reading about community is a bit like reading about love—it falls short of the experience. Used in conjunction with vignettes and ethnographic analysis, however, the features identified in different visions contribute a great deal to the construction of a coherent framework for enabling and understanding teacher professional communities in practice.

THE MULTIPLE AND OVERLAPPING GOALS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Achinstein adapts a definition of teacher professional community from organizational theorists Van Maanen and Barley that succinctly reflects many of the proposed levers for change pursued by those seeking to foster professional communities in schools:

A teacher professional community can be defined as a group of people across a school who are engaged in common work; share to a certain degree a set of values, norms, and orientations towards teaching, students, and schooling; and operate
collaboratively with structures that foster interdependence (adapted from Van Maanen and Barley, 1984).

(Achinstein, 2002: 421–422)

The specific goals and processes suggested by particular visions of teacher professional community described in the research literature vary, but a number of them emphasize teacher learning and often refer to the teacher professional community as a professional learning community. As Mitchell and Sackney (2000) define it, teachers within professional learning communities “take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning” (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). Below, I describe six umbrella categories that reflect common goals researchers and reformers have set for professional learning communities of teachers. Each of these perspectives draws on research findings that indicate the benefits and challenges for teaching and learning when teachers act in concert to “collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another’s professional growth” (Little, 2003, p. 914).

Although this section of the handbook of teacher education research emphasizes teacher learning, it is worth noting that there are other ways to frame the importance of teacher community. And there are other ways to conceptualize teacher learning beyond the narrow goal of student achievement as measured by standardized tests. Indeed, there is a small but significant body of work that critiques instrumental conceptions of teacher learning on the grounds that a narrow focus on instrumental goals (usually the idea that teacher learning will lead to improved student learning) crowds out other compelling reasons for a focus on strong communal relationships in schools (see, for example, Fielding, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Jarzabkowski, 2002; Nias, 1999). At the same time, a number of scholars and practitioners observe that not all professional communities are productive or even desirable. A group of teachers who meet every day and share meals on weekends but use their shared time primarily to complain about or deride students might arguably experience strong communal bonds, but not of the kind most reformers seek (Little & Horn, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Although there is substantial overlap in the groupings that follow (these perspectives are not intended to constitute discreet categories), they prove helpful in examining the scope of work that engages notions of teachers learning within a professional community. The sections that follow describe six interconnected goals that researchers and reformers have frequently cited in the quest for building, sustaining, and examining professional learning communities in schools. Educators interested in developing professional learning communities hope to: (1) improve teacher practice so students will learn; (2) make ideas matter to both teachers and students by creating a culture of intellectual inquiry; (3) develop teacher learning about leadership and school management; (4) promote teacher learning among novice teachers; (5) reduce alienation as a precondition for teacher learning; and (6) pursue social justice and democracy.

**Improve teacher practice so students will learn**

The most central, and commonly referenced goal for teacher learning communities is, not surprisingly, to improve teaching (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). The vision of teacher learning community that seeks most directly to improve teacher practice is perhaps most simply reflected in Little’s entreaty: “Imagine that you
would become a better teacher, just by virtue of being on the staff of a particular school—just from that one fact alone” (1987: 493). In a profession marked by endemic norms of privacy and independence (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975; Pomson, 2005), the opportunities for teachers to learn from their colleagues are rarer than many would like (Smylie & Hart, 2000). The “egg-crate” structure of schools, the schedule of the school day, and the multiple conflicting demands on teachers make collaborative practice and reflection difficult. Schools that seek to break these norms hope that teachers will share the problems and successes they have with other teachers and take collective responsibility for students’ learning.

Kruse et al. (1995), for example, posit a framework for examining professional communities in schools in which “pedagogical growth and development of all teachers are considered a community-wide responsibility, and organizational structures such as peer coaching and time for conversation about practice are viewed as central” (1995: 27). The characteristics of successful professional learning communities, according to their framework, include a clear focus on student learning, reflective practice, deprivatized practice, collaboration, and shared values. Accordingly, the structural conditions necessary for teacher learning to occur include time to meet and talk, physical proximity to one another, interdependent teaching roles, structures for communication, and sufficient teacher autonomy (25). Professional learning communities like these nurture norms of collaboration and exchange that increase teachers’ opportunities to improve classroom practice (Louis & Marks, 1998; Little, 1999).

The literature is replete with variations on this theme and most of these characterizations of teacher learning communities are similar and complementary. Indeed, a number of excellent studies support the notion that given the proper organizational conditions for professional communities to remain strong, instructional innovation can be dramatically strengthened. For example, the University of Chicago’s Center for School Improvement studied elementary schools over a three year period and concluded that professional learning communities spur sustained reform in teaching practices in restructuring schools (Bryk et al., 1999). Lee et al. (1995) report on studies conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools of 11,000 students enrolled in 820 U.S. secondary schools. They found that in those schools that demonstrated characteristics consistent with strong professional learning communities, teachers’ classroom pedagogy was more likely to change in accordance with ongoing reform efforts. Similarly, McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) conducted longitudinal studies of high schools in California and Michigan and found that teacher professional learning communities are linked to instructional improvements and reform (see also McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Reyes et al. (1999) report on their work with Hispanic schools and also find that learning communities enabled teachers to improve their own practice. Over the past decade, other studies—both quantitative and qualitative—have supported these claims (Kruse & Louis, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994b; Smylie & Hart, 2000; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999).

Student learning is also a central concern for those emphasizing teacher learning with and among colleagues. Accordingly, links to student achievement have been studied as well (Little, 1999; Louis & Marks, 1998; McLaughlin, 1993). In Successful School Restructuring, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) report on four large-scale studies that, together, include surveys of 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools across the United States. The studies are notable for their extensive and careful data including surveys, three- and four-year longitudinal case studies, and compilation of student test results. Field research took place in 44 schools in sixteen states. In summarizing these studies (the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, the School Restructuring Study, the
Study of Chicago School Reform, and the Longitudinal Study of School Restructuring), the authors link successful professional learning communities to reduced dropout rates among students, lower absenteeism rates, academic achievement gains (as measured by standardized tests) in math, science, history, and reading, and reduced gaps in achievement gains between students of varying socio-economic backgrounds. Together, these studies provide significant evidence that student learning depends, at least in part, on “the extent to which schools support the ongoing development and productive exercise of teachers’ knowledge and skills” (Smylie & Hart, 2000: 421).

Another promising practice for school-based teacher learning communities involves teachers examining student work collectively rather than individually (Little et al., 2003). A number of projects with that explicit focus have emerged in the past few years. One such project, for example, aims to “build the capacity of school faculties to improve the quality of instruction . . . through a continuous, comprehensive, and critical review of student work” (Academy for Education Development, 2006). Little and colleagues found useful aspects of professional learning communities built around examining student work to include: a process of localizing more generic tools for looking at student work, a healthy balance between comfort and challenge among the teachers, opportunities to use subject matter expertise, and strong and structured group facilitation to build relationships (2003: 189–190). Others have described similar teacher interactions around examinations of student work as fundamental to teacher (and student) learning within learning communities (see Ball & Cohen, 1999; Ball & Rundquist, 1992; Little, 1999; Sykes, 1999).

Studies have also made claims about the relationship between the specific nature and content of discussion among teachers (often called “teacher talk”) and the benefits of such exchanges for teacher and student learning. These studies seek to distinguish teacher talk that is generative of teacher and student learning from simple conversation (e.g. Achinstein, 2002; Little & Horn, 2006). Brian Lord’s model for “critical collegueship,” for example, specifies three concepts that should be reflected in teacher talk and exchange if the professional learning community is to reflect growth in teacher and student learning. First, teachers need to be open to discussing conflict and different views about teaching. He deems this conflict, if it is useful conflict, “productive disequilibrium” (Lord, 1994: 192). Second, he stresses that teachers need to become increasingly familiar (and comfortable) with ambiguity. And third, given the open conflict and ambiguity that he hopes will strengthen and not weaken the community, teachers must seek what Lord calls “collective generativity” (193) or a collective commitment to continuing their work together amidst ambiguity and conflict. Similarly, Ball and Cohen (1999) draw from case studies of teachers engaged in site-based professional development to provide thoughtful analysis of teachers’ exchanges around both joint and individual work. They argue that teacher learning is greatly enriched by grounding professional development in the daily particulars of teacher practice. Meaningful teacher discussions around their practice, Ball and Cohen suggest, especially when situated within assumptions of critical collegiality, strengthen teacher learning opportunities and reinforce the practical basis for teacher growth (see also Gray & Rubenstein, 2004; Hord, 2003; King, 2002; Little & Horn 2006).

Make ideas matter—a culture of intellectual inquiry

Although improving teacher practice is often a primary goal of efforts to foster teacher learning communities in schools, conceptions of teacher learning communities do not all put this goal front and center. A number of other visions of collective teacher learning and
practice hold strong sway in the literature. By focusing on teachers’ lived experiences in schools, many school reforms and teacher community research efforts seek to highlight other levers for change. Some reformers, for example, imagine a successful school-based professional learning community in the way Peter Senge describes it: “a meeting ground for learning—dedicated to the idea that all those involved with it, individually and together, will be continually enhancing and expanding their awareness and capabilities” (2000, p. 6). Although the literature I refer to here is certainly concerned with improving teaching, the immediate goal is to foster a professional culture of intellectual inquiry in the workplace by engaging teachers in collective reflection and exchange in matters of pedagogy and practice.

For example, some advocate subject matter inquiry for teachers, focusing on the teachers as students of their own discipline. Professional development that aims at deepening teachers’ disciplinary knowledge highlights a contrast “between the promise of direct applicability and the more distant goal of intellectual renewal” (Grossman et al., 2001: 952). The challenge, as Grossman and colleagues go on to explain, is “to maintain a focus on students while creating structures for teachers to engage as learners with the subject matters they teach . . . Teacher community must be equally concerned with student learning and with teacher learning” (952). Summer institutes for teachers have long provided intellectual stimulation for teachers in their subject areas, but this work necessarily occurs away from the professional community of the school. Having teachers engage in the difficult and rewarding work of intellectual renewal at the school site is an increasingly popular strategy for nurturing professional learning communities (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Little et al., 2003; Smylie & Hart, 2000). Excellent examples of such practices abound, including a project bringing together humanities teachers to develop interdisciplinary curriculum through study of their own disciplines (Grossman et al., 2001), or subject-based reforms such as Project 2061 for changes in the science curriculum (American Association for the Advancement of Sciences, 1994).

These projects also meet with significant obstacles that I discuss in the section on enduring tensions. It is worth noting here, however, that those who study professional learning communities have become increasingly mindful about exploring and reporting on these tensions. One of the more detailed examples of this kind of reflective analysis can be found in Grossman and colleagues’ (2001) description of the complexities they encountered when working with a mixed group of English and history teachers in an urban Seattle high school. Bringing together these teachers for an “intellectual experience” building an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum, they found, was both rewarding and also fraught with difficulty. For example, they found that teachers—often not used to learning among colleagues—initially formed a “pseudo-community” in which everyone tended to behave as if they all agreed while skirting the substance of important disagreements and suppressing conflict. They also found that as they moved from pseudo-community to more substantive discourse, old tensions within the professional community that had been handily suppressed quickly rose to the surface. Studies by Achinstein (2002), Gunn and King (2003), and Uline et al. (2003) discuss similar challenges. Those reform projects that do not shy away from the challenges described in studies like these seem far more likely to succeed in fostering authentic cultures of intellectual inquiry and learning among teachers (Gray & Rubinstein 2004; Little & Horn 2006).

Another example of intellectual culture-building comes from the tradition of teacher research and university-school research partnerships. The ground-breaking work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992b), for example, articulates the ways teacher inquiry not only improves the individual practice of teachers but also improves the collective
practices and culture of the entire professional community. More often than not, teacher research is concerned with the investigation of pedagogical practice rather than specific subject matter concerns. Teacher-scholars work together (often with the support and/or collaboration of university-based researchers) to examine their own practices, collectively study research done elsewhere, and challenge their own assumptions about teaching strategies, students, and broader educational policy issues (Hatch et al., 2005; Noffke & Stevenson, 1995). As Lieberman and Miller explain, because the research is local, it “resonates with the dilemmas of practice that other teachers experience” (2004, 29).

Some projects blend commitments to examining pedagogical and subject-matter concerns (see, for example, the Carnegie Foundation’s K-12 Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning [CASTL], www.carnegiefoundation.org/programs/index.asp?key=32). Indeed, Center for Research on the Contexts of Teaching researchers McLaughlin and Talbert and others have repeatedly found that strong professional learning communities are characterized by in-depth and ongoing discussions about curriculum and pedagogy in which teachers collectively examine ineffective teaching, and critique and challenge common practices (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Little, 2003). Teaching, in these schools, is regarded less as individualized, rote, and technocratic work, and more as “highly intellectual work, grounded in professional communities where teachers assume responsibility for the learning of their students and of one another . . . a profession that views itself as an intellectual and collective enterprise” (Lieberman & Miller, 2005: 153).

These rationales for recognizing teaching as intellectual work and for building teacher learning communities that encourage intellectual exchange and that “make ideas matter” are deeply rooted in a sense of ethics about teachers as human beings in addition to the alleged efficacy for better practice that may result (for example, Ball & Wilson 1996). In summarizing Katz and Feiman-Nemser’s work on new teacher induction, for example, Goodlad and McMannon (2004) note that teachers are frequently told that they are in schools for students’ well-being. They argue that although this point seems self-evident and ordinary, creating an intellectually and morally sustaining environment requires “caring attention to one another and opportunities for continued [adult] learning” (96) and that this is not only a good idea because it helps to retain new teachers but also because,

it is simply the right thing to do. Sustaining a supportive environment should require no neon-lit slogans or ritualistic contingencies to remind us of the behavior our society should display. John Dewey taught us that traits such as civility, compassion, respect, and the like should be routine, reflective of cultural teaching and of learning what it means to be human.

(96)

Promoting a supportive environment by developing teacher learning communities is a theme also found in the literature about new teacher induction and early teaching experiences which I address later on.

Teachers learning to be leaders

I have noted the ways teachers within school-based learning communities engage intellectually with disciplinary content and pedagogical strategies for improving practice. Collectively examining and making decisions about school policies, leadership strategies, and school reform more broadly is another means reformers have touted for building intellectual engagement and on-the-job teacher learning. Many teachers describe the
larger political issues around schooling and discuss and write about their desire for change, but, as Cochran-Smith (2001) observes, opportunities for teachers to reflect on daily decisions, engage in thoughtful inquiry, or collaborate are few (285). For reformers advocating teacher leadership, inquiry goes beyond teachers learning their own disciplines or pedagogical approaches as described above. It has teachers learning to work together as leaders of the school site.

Educational policymakers have recognized the importance of organizational design and effective leadership in establishing and maintaining vibrant learning communities for both teachers and students (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Shared decision-making, collective action regarding school policies, and reflection on broader school reform issues are seen as promising ways to engage teachers, foster collegiality, and improve practice. Many school reformers now hope that teachers will become instructional leaders who work and learn together across corridors, departments, and disciplines to foster educational reform (Barth, 2003; Lieberman, 1995; Leithwood, 2002; Maeroff, 1993). A professional learning community can be a pre-condition for effective teacher leadership and also be sustained by the collegial practices of teacher-led schools (Westheimer, 1998).

One of the enduring tensions in efforts to involve teachers in leadership positions is what Little and Bartlett (2002) referred to as the “Huberman Paradox.” Michael Huberman studied teachers’ career development and found that those teachers who became involved in school and district leadership roles tended to suffer greater “burn-out” than those who remained content to work only in their own classrooms with their students (Huberman, 1993). As Lieberman and Miller (2004) summarize the paradox: “on the one hand, teachers were stimulated by their involvement in reform work and leadership in their school; on the other hand, that very work led to burnout, disaffection, professional conflict, and disappointment” (p. 19). Other studies come to similar conclusions (e.g. McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Johnson et al., 2004).

To a large degree, researchers and reformers suspect that the difficulties experienced by teachers who take on leadership positions are due, in large part, to the absence of a professional culture that supports collaborative leadership in the schools and local districts. If, rather than individual teachers seeking to effect broad change, teachers worked together in leadership roles, the benefits of collective teacher engagement could be realized without the professional burnout that seemed to accompany individual efforts. Building a collaborative culture, therefore, became a goal of those seeking to engage teachers in leadership roles (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Lambert, 2003). And a number of studies have examined the ways school and district administrators can create the conditions necessary for professional learning communities to flourish for example by adjusting the school schedule so that teachers could have time to meet together (Barth, 2003; Glickman, 2002). Working within professional learning communities, reformers argue, teacher leaders can reinvigorate the work of teaching for themselves and their colleagues, making it collaborative, purposeful, and dynamic (Fullan, 1994; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Furthermore, the kind of teacher learning that occurs in schools where teachers take on leadership roles can serve as an additional counterforce to teacher burnout. When teachers experience professional growth, they are more likely to stay in teaching (Nias, 1999; Strong & St. John, 2001; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999).

Teacher learning for novice teachers

Teaching has long been characterized by unusually high attrition rates, especially among new teachers (Lortie, 1975; Johnson et al., 2004). A number of studies indicate that some
50 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Murnane et al., 1991). Moreover, teacher induction and retention programs have generally been far less structured and uniform than those of many other professional occupations. With some exceptions, a new teacher on her first day of school is often expected to perform the same or similar duties of a teacher who has been teaching for 25 years.

Further exacerbating the difficult first years of teaching, new teachers will spend a vast majority of their workday in isolation from colleagues in what many within the profession characterize as a “sink-or-swim” or “trial-by-fire” proposition (see Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Johnson et al., 2004; Kardos et al., 2001). This pervasive isolation leads to two kinds of observations pertinent to a discussion of teacher learning communities: first, new teachers require connections to veteran teachers in order to succeed in their first few years; and, second, most new and veteran teachers alike require a greater sense of connection and community to achieve the kind of personal and professional satisfaction that will keep them in the profession.

Susan Moore Johnson and colleagues in the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at Harvard University conducted a longitudinal study of more than 50 teachers new to the teaching profession and found that the professional culture of the school greatly impacted novice teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in teaching or move on to other careers (Johnson et al., 2004). They identified three kinds of professional community (novice-oriented, veteran-oriented, and integrated) that offered varying levels of support to new teachers (Kardos et al., 2001). The consequences of veteran-oriented professional cultures—in which the teachers tend to split into camps of novice and veteran teachers—are dramatic:

In the first year of our study, twenty-one of the fifty new teachers taught within veteran-oriented professional cultures. Of those twenty-one, nine (43 percent) left their schools at the end of that year, and five (24 percent) left public school teaching altogether”.

(Johnson et al., 2004: 150)

Similarly, in novice-oriented professional cultures—in which the community can be strong, but without a commitment to teacher learning—attrition can also be high. By contrast, in integrated professional cultures, novice and veteran teachers cohabit the professional community equally and orient their intertwined professional culture around sharing and improving practice. These schools emphasize “teachers as learners” (Johnson et al., 2004: 158) and their ability to retain teachers appears considerably higher than in either of the other two orientations (14 of the 17 teachers in their study who began their career in integrated professional communities remain in teaching).

Important studies by Sharon Feiman-Nemser and others have similarly shown the importance of professional collaboration and exchange, especially for new teachers. Mentoring, in particular—when practiced within a strong professional community—strengthens teacher retention, teacher learning, and pedagogical innovation (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1999; Gold, 1996; Katz & Feiman-Nemser, 2004; Strong & St. John, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). It also helps novice teachers form and enact their own visions of good teaching and identify themselves with the teaching profession (Hammerness, 2006; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This becomes especially important as routes into teaching proliferate and more new teachers enter the field without professional preparation.
Another issue affecting the ways both novice and veteran teachers learn on the job stems from broader cultural concerns over growing alienation (Bellah et al., 1985; Selznick, 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989). Scholars cite rampant individualism and isolation from one another as a growing impediment to our collective health (e.g. Putnam, 2000). Amitai Etzioni’s communitarian movement, for example, seeks to remedy these ills (Etzioni, 1993). Through association and interaction, psychologists observe, human beings satisfy their need for attachment and social bonds (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1963). Similarly, sociologists and political scientists emphasize the sense of identity and the commitments that result from participation in community. Human experience, notes Dewey (1938), is inherently social, and therefore depends on interpersonal contact and collaboration within community.

Schools, many argue, must provide this sense of connection and purpose since traditional sources for connectedness have diminished. And teachers, as much as students, require these attachments in order to live out satisfying professional lives in schools and create conditions of community for students. Reflecting the work of sociologists and anthropologists who have long been interested in the ties that bind people together, reformers aim to have teachers form learning communities that inspire their work and enrich the connections among themselves and their students (Lieberman, 1995). They hope teachers will work collaboratively on projects they find meaningful. Teachers might meet during lunch, after school, and during free periods of the day to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and individual students. Rather than the isolation and professional alienation that is common in many schools, these teachers might experience a sense of membership and belonging, thereby strengthening the profession. Consequently, the role of trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2003) and friendship (Lima, 1997; Jarzabkowski, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994) among teachers in professional learning communities have also been explored. The central goal of these efforts is to nurture and sustain a professional culture that offers the sense of belonging, association, and fellowship that makes it possible for teachers to learn from one another and experience a sense of growing professional expertise (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Pomson, 2005; Uline et al., 2003).

However, it is not only to attract and retain teachers or to improve teacher practice and student test scores (all overly narrow and instrumental purposes some suggest) that scholars adopt the discourse of community. The community metaphor for educators, social theorists, and philosophers, is also intimately entwined with notions of democracy, social justice, and visions of the good society. I take up these views in the following section.

Pursuing social justice, democracy, and a communal way of life

A number of writers find the language of “professional” learning community potentially limiting in its focus on narrowly pragmatic or technocratic goals (e.g. Zeichner, 1991; Fielding, 1999; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Indeed, the word “professional” can demand attention to technical expertise rather than to broader social and socio-political commitments, especially when “professional” is tied to improving student test scores among students (as is increasingly the case among policy makers). Visions for teacher community, some authors suggest, should reflect the importance of democratic communities in pursuit of a better society. For example, Amy Gutmann, in her seminal work, Democratic Education (1987), argues that educators aiming at schooling that reinforces democratic notions of community must “create the conditions under which teachers can cultivate the
capacity for critical reflection on democratic culture” (Gutmann, 1987: 79). Fielding (1999) ties his vision for teacher collegiality (which he calls “radical collegiality”) to “an educational practice intentionally and demonstrably linked to the furtherance of democracy,” “communal practice,” and “educative engagement with each other and the world around us” (pp. 17–18). Fielding’s suggestions are more thematic than tied to the actual practices of schooling (the power of peer learning, students as teachers and teachers as learners, reconstructing education as a democratic project, and so on), but he is aligned with other scholars and education writers who suggest similar ties between education, democracy, and teacher community in schools (Clark & Wasley, 1999; Furman & Mertz, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Meier, 1995; Pomson, 2005; Westheimer, 1998).

Democracy, in this sense, is more than a means for collective decision making. Rather it is consistent with what Strike (1999) describes as “thick democracy” signifying,

a form of human community in which human flourishing is best realized and which is, therefore, essential to a good life. Thick democracy agrees that democratic practices promote fair decision making, but its value goes well beyond this. Thick democracy attaches significant value to such goods as participation, civic friendship, inclusiveness, and solidarity.

(Strike, 1999: 60)

What, then, would it mean for schools to pursue as an educational goal, a vision of “thick democracy”? The intellectual origins of school community as a (thick) democratic endeavor stem at least as far back as John Dewey and fellow turn-of-the-century progressives. “Democracy,” Dewey wrote, “is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1916: 87). Schools thus require activities that have “social aims” and “utilize the materials of typical social situations. For under such conditions the school becomes itself a form of social life, a miniature community, and one in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school walls” (Dewey, 1916: 360).

The path from Dewey’s philosophy of education to discussion of the conditions under which teachers live, work, and learn in schools is becoming increasingly well-traveled. Teachers should participate in developing democratic communities in schools that derive from collective projects. “Things gain meaning,” Dewey noted, “by being used in a shared experience or joint action” (1916: 16) and this line of argument can be found in a number of calls for greater attention to teacher professional communities in schools. As Hargreaves and Fink (2006) observes, it is either insincere or naïve to expect students to “learn the important skills of living together in a pluralist society from teachers who—within the school at least—all too often lack the kinds of interactions and relationships with colleagues that embody just such constructive discourse” (15).

Notions of democratic community also imply notions of social betterment and social justice. In Democratic Education, for example, Amy Gutmann (1987) includes nonrepression and nondiscrimination as essential principles to uphold in any democratic education. The principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination allow families and other community members to shape, but not entirely constrain, children’s future choices by obligating “professional educators to develop in children the deliberative capacity to evaluate competing conceptions of good lives and good societies” (46). Similarly, researchers and practitioners who view education as a means of transforming society often see teacher professional communities as a means of creating school cultures where both teachers and students learn how to promote just such transformation (Ayers, 2000; Fielding, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994).
Although some attention has been given to studying the possibilities for teacher community to advance a social-justice agenda, there has been little empirical work that seeks to assess the success or failure of such programs to effect change. Furthermore, much of the (non-empirical) discourse tends toward the saccharine—rhetorically sweet, but ideologically insipid. The values most often chosen as exemplars of teacher communities oriented towards social justice are those that produce maximum agreement, not necessarily those that are most reflective of philosophical or political notions of justice. “All children can learn” is far more likely to be a defining value of a teacher community aimed at “social justice” than values or goals that would likely engender controversy; and research to date has not, for the most part, sought to distinguish between teacher communities that pursue particular social justice agendas and those that do not. In other words, teacher communities (and studies that describe them) are more likely to boast a high degree of inclusiveness than strong adherence to a particular ideology that might foreground tensions around issues of social justice (see for example, Fielding, 1999).

ENDURING ISSUES AND CONCLUSIONS

Organizational management guru Peter Senge gained a great deal of attention for his 1990 book, *The Fifth Discipline*, which urged corporate America to consider developing “learning organizations.” In learning organizations, Senge explained, people continually learn from each other, “new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured,” and “collective aspiration is set free” (p. 3). The book made an impact on education researchers and practitioners who were engaged in their own efforts to effect change in schools. As Senge’s notion of the learning organization became incorporated into the literature on school reform, “learning communities” became the more popular term among educators. But schools are not corporate boardrooms and they rarely run like them. School administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers seeking to foster professional communities in schools face obstacles that have outlasted periods of significant reforms. Some of these obstacles are widely recognized in the literature (isolation, lack of time, school architecture, and external pressures such as standardized testing). Others are given short-shrift or avoided altogether (persistent tensions between strong shared beliefs and inclusiveness, micro-politics and conflict, and macro-politics and power). In the remainder of this chapter, I explore these continuing challenges to teacher learning communities in practice. In seeking to better understand the connections between teacher professional communities and teacher learning, these are the areas I suggest are in need of further study.

Isolation and the culture of privacy

Isolation and a culture of privacy in teaching has been one of the most persistent threads of inquiry and commentary in the teacher community literature. Empirical studies have repeatedly shown the difficulties involved in breaking norms of autonomy and privacy at the same time that they have shown the potential benefits of doing so for teacher learning. For example, when Hargreaves and colleagues (2006) asked teachers about obstacles they encountered in seeking to effect school change, the most prominent response teachers gave was having to implement these changes alone without the benefit of collegial professional dialogue. Similarly, Elmore and Burney (1999) found that the greatest “enemy of instructional improvement” is the isolation that most teachers experience during the school day (p. 268). And the isolation is enforced not only by the structural
conditions of teaching but also the cultural. What Little calls a “culture of isolation” is often internalized by teachers themselves who often feel too vulnerable or too busy to stop to learn from a colleague (Little, 1990, 1999). Pomson (2005: 787) sums up two explanations for teacher isolationism nicely—it is seen as either:

(a) an adaptive strategy in environments where the resources required to meet instructional demands are in short supply or
(b) an ecological condition, encouraged by workplace settings where physical isolation is pervasive.

Teachers cannot learn from each other if they rarely see or talk to one another. Yet these are the working conditions in which teachers in many if not most schools find themselves. Numerous studies reinforce these disconcertingly conjoined truths: there is much to be gained by teachers working and learning through collective practice and reflection, and the culture of teaching and the organizational constraints on schools mitigate against such practices (for example, Bryk et al., 1999; Kruse & Louis, 1995). Indeed, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle found, the conditions of individual practice, on the whole, seem to be largely bolstered rather than challenged by organizational norms of the profession:

As a profession, teaching is primarily defined by what teachers do when they are not with other teachers. When teachers are evaluated, it is individual classroom performance that is scrutinized. When contracts are negotiated, it is amount of instructional time that is often a key issue. In fact, when teachers are out of their classrooms or talking to other teachers, they are often perceived by administrators, parents, and sometimes even by teachers themselves as not working.

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992a: 301)

Furthermore, the isolation is not limited to novice or veteran teachers, nor is it limited to schools of a particular demographic (Johnson et al., 2004; Lytle & Fecho, 1991). Despite two decades of reform efforts aimed at bringing teachers together in schools, many educators still observe that teacher work remains primarily private (Barth, 2003; Bredeson, 2003; Grossman et al., 2001).

Since the constraints on professional learning communities are not only organizational but also embedded in the professional culture, even when efforts to facilitate collaboration are implemented, resistance can be strong. In “Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers’ Professional Relations,” Little describes a phenomenon that is increasingly familiar to school reformers, staff developers, and teachers:

The most common configurations of teacher-to-teacher interaction may do more to bolster isolation than to diminish it; the culture that Lortie described as individualistic, present-oriented, and conservative is thus not altered but is indeed perpetuated by the most prevalent examples of teacher collaboration or exchange.

(1990, p. 511)

Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986) reported similar disparity. The “cellular” nature of teaching in schools, they found, may be seen either as unfortunate lack of mutual support or as a welcome guarantee of professional autonomy (p. 517). Little and colleagues note that “Shared inquiry into student learning and teaching practice runs against the grain of typical professional talk and counter to the prevailing norms of non-interference, privacy, and harmony” (2003: 189–190). Management plans that grant teachers greater
decision-making authority often free teachers from bureaucracy but do not connect them to one another.

Another common theme in explanations for the persistent isolation of teachers is teachers’ own fears of exposure. In many schools, the expert teacher is considered to be the one who is confidently independent and self-sufficient (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992b). Nervousness about evaluations or being embarrassed in front of peers or superiors result in many teachers preferring the isolation of their own classrooms to the perceived humiliation that might come from more collegial arrangements. Some teachers, even relatively novice ones, fear that if they ask too many questions, colleagues will perceive them to be less than competent (Richardson-Koehler, 1988; Pomson, 2005). These norms also help to explain the resistance to projects like video clubs, in which teachers videotape and discuss each other’s teaching (see Grossman et al., 2001).

How then do reformers address these obstacles? Researchers and school reformers have noted key strategies to overcoming the isolation so endemic to the profession of teaching. These include deliberately structured professional activities that require integrated work (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Barth, 2003; Kahne & Westheimer, 2000), interdisciplinary teaching strategies that bring teachers together around content themes (Grossman et al., 2001), action research projects around shared interests (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001), and organizational structures around subject-matter such as high school departments that encourage the exchange of ideas and mutual learning (Little, 1999; McLaughlin, 1993). Each of these strategies assume both that bringing teachers together to learn from one another will help to overcome persistent professional isolation and also that reduced teacher isolation (by changing the organizational structures of schooling, for example) will allow teachers to learn from one another.

Notably, the most transient and least successful efforts at bringing teachers together in shared inquiry tend to be those whose focus is on community-building itself in the absence of more intellectually or pragmatically substantive goals. Team-building, sunshine committees, shared lunchrooms, and after-school social gatherings are excellent supplements but poor substitutes for collective work on meaningful professional projects. Planning a shared curriculum unit together has been found to be a better approach to fostering teacher learning and dialogue than a lone event of introduce-your-neighbor (Barth, 2003; Kahne & Westheimer, 2000). A detailed and rigorous study in elementary schools by Cousins et al. (1994) found, for example, that in-depth joint work on curriculum planning and implementation among teachers resulted in significant conceptual and affective gains while casual conversation or occasional advice did not.

Strategies that challenge the culture of isolation common in the teaching profession are similar in approach and kind to strategies for broader school reform advocated in the past several decades. Reform efforts that seek to address some of the most intractable obstacles to developing and maintaining professional learning communities in schools aim towards many of the same levers for change: the organizational and administrative conditions discussed above, and the temporal and architectural structures of schools which I discuss below.

**Time and the pressures of standardization**

Time is a precious commodity for most teachers (Lortie, 1975; Johnson, 1990) and relationship-building is not a speedy process. Furthermore, building a professional community, especially around opportunities for teacher learning, can take up many (often unpaid) hours (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992b; King, 2002). A number of researchers suggest that school reforms to increase available professional time for
teachers to spend together may well be a pre-condition for improved teacher learning (Bredson, 2003; Leithwood, 2002; Shollenberger-Swaim & Swaim, 1999). Teacher research, for example, is a prominent strategy to engage teachers in collective reflection on their own practice and widely understood as a potentially beneficial activity for teacher learning and community. But many teachers are hesitant to engage in teacher research for fear that it will take time away from their work with students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992b). Indeed, the most prominent examples of teacher learning take place outside of the school entirely. Teacher institutes and development seminars are most often stand-alone workshops in the summer or other non-instructional time. Teachers’ developmental learning is rarely integrated into the daily rhythms of the school day (King, 2002; Little, 1999; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1992).

Recent emphasis on standards and testing benchmarks further magnify the scarcity of time for teachers to pursue collective work. Highly restrictive, state-level curriculum frameworks, standards-based evaluations, and high-stakes testing for teachers and students can severely curtail new teachers’ capacities to teach as a community of colleagues who locate their teaching and curriculum development in the primacy of their own and their students’ experiences. Standards, high-stakes testing, and competency testing for both students and teachers are currently the noisiest and most prevalent educational conversations, and calls for developing learning communities or innovative collective teaching can be lost in the din. In the U.S., forty-nine states have now adopted higher academic standards as one of the major strategies for educational improvement (Clark & Wasley, 1999). Test scores are frequently used for decisions with regard to tracking, promotion, and graduation (National Research Council, 1999). Especially in districts where low test scores and high-stakes policies threaten students, teachers, and principals, a test-centered pedagogy and curriculum will frequently dominate (Brabeck, 1999; Shepard, 1991; Wiggins, 1993). In many cases, opportunities for collective leadership and reflection are constrained or focused solely on raising students’ test scores. In a study of 24 schools across 12 districts in six states, Berry and others found that “although high-stakes accountability systems help focus professional development efforts on the curricular needs of students, little evidence exists to support the claim that such systems help teachers change their practice to enhance student learning” (summarized in ASCD, 2004, p. 3).

Furthermore, “A tendency exists—particularly in low-performing schools—to narrow the focus of professional development activities to tested subjects or provide general support that is disconnected from curricular needs” (3).

The inability of most teacher organizations to resist the onslaught of standards-based reforms and free up time to pursue broader visions of teacher and student learning hints at a related but infrequently mentioned issue regarding teacher professional community. Some authors express concern that the term “community” can be mis-used as a way to avoid the thornier issues of teacher professionalization, school funding, and low status of the profession (e.g. Meier, 2000; Zeichner, 1991). “Learning communities” cannot mitigate the fiscal crisis some schools now experience, these educators argue, and schools such as those described in Jonathan Kozol’s Savage Inequalities need adequate funding before talk about “getting along” or having teachers volunteer their time after school hours. Time and money may not be sufficient to move teachers from talk that is friendly to discussions that are generative of teacher learning, but many argue that they are necessary preconditions (Ayers, 2000; Sizer, 1992; Westheimer, 2000).

Similarly, research conducted as part of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, at Harvard University, makes clear that teachers’ lack of time impedes the formation of strong collaborative teacher professional cultures (Johnson et al., 2004). They point out
that it costs money to provide the time and space for both new and veteran teachers to meet and that matters of time and money are likely to be obstacles to community particularly in low-income and understaffed schools (see also Shollenberger-Swaim and Swaim, 1999 for the limitations of teachers’ time). Narrowing of the curriculum in response to testing mandates and adding extra “drill” classes on top of already burdened teacher schedules further restricts teachers’ opportunities for joint work and professional exchange (Kohn, 2000; Meier, 2000; Ohanian, 1999).

Architecture

Although public school reformers rarely have the opportunity to build a new school from scratch, many small-scale and private efforts have been able to make the architectural space of the school more conducive to both teacher–teacher and teacher–student interactions. And certainly, many educators have desired such changes (Meier, 1995; Barth, 1990; Sergiovanni 1994a). Probably owing to the lack of meaningful authority educators generally have over constructing the architectural plan of most schools, there have been few empirical studies of the effects of physical architecture on the learning environment and none of the effects on the capacities and predilections of teachers engaging in collegial learning activities. The small body of work that addresses the physical architecture of schools tends to narrowly emphasize healthy environments, air quality, heating, cooling, and so on (see, for example, Schneider, 2002).

There are some notable exceptions, such as Architecture for Education: New School Designs from the Chicago Competition (Sharp et al., 2003) and The Language of School Design (2005) by Nair and Fielding. Both works aim to connect research on teaching and learning to school planning and design strategies. Effective learning environments, the authors of these works argue, are dependent as much on the spatial arrangements of the school as they are on the curriculum. Nair and Fielding, for example, draw from Christopher Alexander’s classic work on “Pattern Language” to propose schools that reflect current concerns for learning communities, at least for students (see also Brubaker, 1997). Alexander’s groundbreaking work in the world of architecture sought to identify “patterns” in the built environment that seem to nourish human relationships, interplay, and exchange. In The Language of School Design, the authors apply Alexander’s theories to school design, hoping to address the “chasm between widely acknowledged best [educational] practice principles and the actual design of a majority of school facilities” (p. 2).

Other examples can be drawn from studies with foci on broader aspects of teacher professionalism and community. Scribner et al. (2002), for example, describe a school in which the principal decided to eliminate teacher classrooms and have teachers move around the school to their classes of students:

One thing the principal did that I think is very good was to eliminate the teachers’ desks in their rooms. Instead, we have a departmental concept. The teachers have all their desks in a room. The teachers didn’t like that, but the new ones, they don’t know any different. I don’t even know if she anticipated the benefit, but just by putting the teachers with each other, the new teachers are going to push the old teachers in some new ideas that they’ve got, and the old teachers are going to show the new teachers some of the neat things that do work.

(Veteran science teacher, quoted in Scribner et al., 2002, p. 68)

Their example demonstrates the considerable influence even small and inexpensive “architectural” decisions can make on the professional culture of the school.
One final area of inquiry that considers the impact of school architecture and organization on professional learning community is the small schools literature (Ayers, 2000; Raywid, 1996; Stevens & Kahne, 2006). The increased personalization and diminished complexity of small schools enables less bureaucracy and more interdependence between and among teachers, administrators, and students. A number of studies reinforce the findings of Bryk et al. (1999): “Among all the factors considered, small school size stood out as being an important facilitator of professional community . . . Professional community was much more prevalent in elementary schools with less than 350 students than it was in larger schools” (Bryk et al. 1999: 767; see also Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Gladden, 1998; Raywid, 1996).

At the same time that certain forms of architecture may be correlated with teacher collaboration through the establishment of communal spaces, these spaces can also be seen as unwelcome efforts at containment or exclusion. School-within-school organizational structures, for example, can lead to tensions within the larger building and concerns over containment and isolation (Achinstein, 2002; Raywid, 1996). Moreover, in a study by Gunn and King (2003), one of the author’s classrooms was relocated to another floor, under the assumption that “Gunn and the other team member on Gunn’s floor were colluding together against the team leadership and that the close proximity of their classrooms was facilitating the formation of factions within the team” (Gunn & King, 2003: 182).

Overall, however, the literature on school architecture tends to be more metaphorical than literal. Bredeson (2003), for example, advocates new “architecture” for professional development in schools. Ideally, according to Bredeson, learning spaces for educators are not “isolated, self-contained spaces” but rather spaces that “support individual growth, foster collaborative learning, and build collective capacity” (p. 40). A number of others have observed the effects of spatial arrangements on teacher learning and collaboration as well (Glickman, 2002; Leithwood, 2002; Raywid, 1996; Rosenholz, 1989). It is these often modest and/or metaphorical reforms to the physical space of the school coupled with the organizational and administrative reforms described earlier that have received substantial attention from educators and policy-makers interested in fostering learning communities for teachers.

**Tension between community and liberal inclusiveness**

Popular models for community generally demonstrate strong insights into the practical and theoretical tributaries that those interested in building community in schools must cross. Most, however, are less clear when discussing the social and political forces that often turn tributaries into quagmires. Nowhere is this more evident than in the considerable gloss that has consistently represented much of the literature on teacher professional community when it comes to issues of beliefs, ideology, and conflict. For example, conceptions of diversity have been central to most discussions about school and teacher community. The literature is replete with mentions of “tolerance,” “multicultural perspective,” and “diversity of ideas.” But relatively few works address the tough dilemmas that emerge when practitioners pursue the ideals of democratic and egalitarian communities, hoping to become neither excessively insular nor aimlessly diffuse. Much of the research and practice relating teacher community to teacher learning advocates working together, overlooking differences, and creating friendlier, more open work settings for teachers. More work would be useful that studies power imbalances and the resulting sense of impotence that threaten to undo so many of these well-meaning reforms. In short, those of us who study teacher collaboration could benefit more from plodding
through the muck, the ambiguity, and the mystery of how communities succeed and fail to manage conflict and how they ensure full participation of members with a diversity of backgrounds and interests. More specifically, studies are needed that address at least two persistent and overlapping tensions: the simultaneous pursuit of inclusiveness and community; and the reluctance to engage competing ideologies and conflict.

The tension between community and inclusiveness when it comes to professional learning communities is rooted in a gap in the broader schools-as-communities literature. This literature, as Strike (1999) points out, has not “adequately come to terms with the difficulties involved in sharing values in the public schools of a liberal democratic society” (p. 47). While most reformers advocate shared values as a basis for teacher community (Fielding, 1999; Little, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1994a), few engage what Strike notes is a tension between constitutive values and liberal inclusiveness. Constitutive values (values that are coherent enough to constitute communities among teachers and students), Strike explains, represent those beliefs and ideals people share about the good life and about ways schools might contribute to it. Catholic Schools are prima facie examples of schools with strong constitutive values because “those who are members of Catholic School communities can share a common educational project. They know what they are about because they have a shared vision of a good life and of how learning contributes to it” (p. 50). But, if we think towards extremes, no community can be wholly united by shared values and still be entirely inclusive. Indeed, anthropologists have long noted that communities are defined by their borders. Who is excluded is as important as who is included.

There have been a few responses to this dilemma, and I will describe just two here. Strike (1999) suggests a middle ground that calls for constitutive values that are “thick” enough to constitute community but vague enough to allow for competing ideas from all members of the community:

the standard of liberal inclusiveness does not so much reject constitutive values as it wants to privatize them. Liberals often value community. They reject communities whose values are made obligatory . . . for those who do not share them.

(Strike, 1999: 68)

Strike advocates building more opportunities for a middle ground that arises from greater freedom-of-association within public schools and public spaces. “Houses” within public schools, for example, could offer homes to students and teachers with varying but still constitutive conceptions of the good life. Given a number of different houses with varying degrees of constitutive ideals, no one, presumably, would be excluded from the school community entirely or branded second-class citizens.

A second response is illustrated by the work of Scribner et al. (2002). These authors argue that professional autonomy and individual needs, rather than being in conflict with community, might actually serve as necessary conditions that make professional community possible. They observe that much of the literature on professional community assumes a concordance between the health of the community and the degree to which collective identity supplants individual identity and needs (p. 49). They suggest that a more salient frame for examining the strength of professional community might be named a shared identity among heterogeneous individuals engaged in professional relationships rather than a collective identity that, as they see it, requires giving up individual autonomy and needs. Professional autonomy and attention to individual needs, the authors argue, are necessary conditions for strong professional communities where teachers can and do learn from one another. They describe one school in which the
principal sought to impose a collective identity among teachers and was rebuffed. The teachers saw the imposition of collective action as a threat to their professional autonomy. In another (preferred) school, the principal encouraged a shared identity (“we-ness”) that protected teachers’ individual needs and their professional autonomy (“I-ness”) and therefore resulted in a strong sense of professional community where shared teacher learning became the norm.

I make a related observation in Among Schoolteachers: Community, Autonomy, and Individuality in Teachers’ Work (Westheimer, 1998). In describing two professional communities of teachers (Brandeis and Mills schools), I acknowledge a common tension and fear: that within a community with shared beliefs and interests, individuality will be suppressed and the individual submerged into a monolithic whole (p. 146). But the Mills community seemed to demonstrate something else at work entirely: individuality and community were unexpected bedfellows in the quest for a professional learning environment:

Among the teachers, administrators, and staff at Mills are the usual gamut of individuals as well: the gregarious and the reserved, the associated and the isolated, those who stand out and those who prefer to blend in. [But these identities] call into question critics’ customary polarization of the individual and the collective . . . I learned an extraordinary amount about individuals’ multiple roles in the community [and] their identities in relation to the community. Walter is known for speaking quietly. Paul builds wheelchairs. Mark is a workhorse. Sabrina is active in local community politics and can be counted on to bring important aspects of her work to bear in curriculum development for the school.

Collective projects at this school showcase teachers’ talents and model the use of these talents for social purposes. Rather than submerging the individual within the group, collective work and frequent and engaged participation provide an opportunity and forum to develop an individual identity within and in relation to the group. This allowed teachers to learn from each other’s different talents and capacities.

There are several other works that explore the tension between inclusiveness and community, and a small number do so empirically (Leithwood, 2002; Malen, 1995; Marshall & Scribner, 1995). This area, however, like the one that follows, is ripe for further investigation. In what ways can collective projects among teachers further teacher learning and development? How might communal identities be forged without sacrificing individual teachers’ sense of autonomy? What role can school leaders play?

Reluctance to engage competing ideologies

The beliefs about teaching and learning that teachers, administrators, school board members, and parents share affect the curriculum, the organization, and the values conveyed to students about the purposes of education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Strike, 1999). These beliefs and orientations are visible not only in the content of the curriculum but also in the organization and practices of the teacher professional community in each school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) and or smaller units within the school such as high school departments (Siskin, 1994). Learning among teachers is accordingly affected by the embedded priorities and emphases of the broader professional community. One teacher professional community might emphasize teachers’ individual autonomy, rights, and responsibilities to colleagues while another might be driven by a strong collective mission and collective values. One group of teachers might work together to develop
interdisciplinary joint curriculum while another might convene in order to help individual teachers pursue individually-defined curricular goals. In contrast to so many school, both of these examples (and there are surely more) represent communities in which teachers do not feel isolated, share opportunities for learning from one another, and may be content in their jobs. But the differences are consequential: ideologically, different forms of learning communities embody differing beliefs about the purposes of professional communities, the philosophical, social, and political beliefs, values, and opinions that shape the way a group of teachers view the world, and the broad purposes of education in pursuing those beliefs.

Even the names various schools use to describe the ways their teachers work together can be revealing. A “teams,” for example denotes an instrumental group where individuals come together to accomplish a task. Other schools might divide teachers and students into “families,” implying that individuals are part of a collective. In teams, individuals can accomplish goals together that may be unattainable alone. In families—ideally—individuals gain a sense of connection, belonging, and affinity.

When researchers study the effects of teacher communities on teacher learning, it would be useful to further distinguish empirically between teacher learning in these different kinds of learning communities. Many argue that teachers should share beliefs to form a robust professional community, but few articulate which beliefs might be worth sharing. “What beliefs should be shared?” is a thorny question almost always left to the imagination of practitioners and policy-makers. When it comes to specifying the kinds of beliefs that might lead to particular kinds of teacher learning and exchange, the literature on professional learning communities remains largely—to borrow Little’s description of collegiality (1990)—“conceptually amorphous and ideologically sanguine” (p. 519).

Researchers and reformers often assert the role that sharing beliefs plays in community-building while ignoring the importance of the nature of the beliefs themselves and how these beliefs might bring about different kinds of learning. Developing not only clear conceptualizations of learning communities but also of the specific values, commitments, and ideologies that such conceptualizations embody could significantly strengthen practical efforts to build professional learning communities among teachers in schools (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Westheimer, 2000).

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

The literature on how teachers learn with and from colleagues has evolved significantly in the 20 years or so since discussions about professional learning communities became common. A variety of school reform efforts depend on teachers’ ability to work with and learn from colleagues (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Yet teacher education and development has only just begun to serve as a focus for developing learning communities. Schools led by communities of teachers who are responsible for making curricular, organizational, and sometimes financial decisions require that teachers learn from one another and become well versed about the benefits, commitments, tensions, and trouble spots that emerge when people learn and work together in demanding environments.

Research has demonstrated links between professional learning communities for teachers and: improved teacher practice and student learning; a climate of intellectual inquiry; teachers’ ability and willingness to serve as leaders; new teacher learning and retention; reduced alienation; and social justice and democracy. These studies provide significant rationale for continued work in the areas of professional learning communities.
Little and Horn (2006), for example, are currently studying teacher discourse to see what kinds of “teacher talk” are consequential and hold the greatest potential for teacher learning. More research of this nature would be beneficial to those seeking to understand the ways teachers learn from each other.

Moreover, enduring tensions persist and call for continued investigation. These include tensions around: isolation and privacy; time teachers have to engage in collaborative learning in a climate of standards and assessment; school architecture; inclusiveness; and varying ideologies. Research to date has indicated that amidst these tensions and without adequate preparation for teachers, expectations for teacher learning are easily thwarted (Lieberman & Miller, 2004).

Teacher learning among colleagues is a promising area for teacher development and reform. Further clarifying the substance and direction of teacher learning communities in practice is the task researchers and teacher educators now face.

NOTES

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2 This observation is the subject of many biblical parables about teaching and is also described in Grossman et al. (2001).


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