

A Journey through Excellence in the Big Country

4 States, 17 schools, 10 flights, condensed into an itinerary spanning 20 days: a journey through excellence unfurled before me.

As recipient of the Walter Hines Page Scholarship 2009, I was privileged to undertake a study tour of the U.S.A. researching into my chosen field of Professional Learning Communities, (PLCs). My interest in this area stemmed from an action-research project which I had previously undertaken in my own secondary school, exploring the perceptions surrounding the areas of collaboration and collaborative practice. As Principal Teacher of a Support for Learning Department, collaborative practice has always been an integral part of my role yet collaboration and collaborative practice as my research revealed are not always undertaken willingly or assumed by stakeholders to be particularly beneficial.

The implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), which has at its core the principle of inclusion, requires and expects that programmes of work are suited to developing success for all pupils suited to their needs.

On the good counsel of Rick du Four, one of the leading authorities in the United States on the area of Professional Learning Communities, I assembled an itinerary focused on centres of good practice. My journey would lead me to St Louis-Michigan, Chicago-Illinois, Richmond and Fairfax-Virginia, and finally to Windsor-Upstate New York.

My travels were further enhanced by the hospitality bestowed upon me by members of the branches of the English Speaking Union in Chicago and Virginia.

In Chicago, at the elegant home of Anna and Jaime Moreno, I was privileged to be able to speak to branch members about the theme of my study scholarship at an evening reception. I welcomed the opportunity to share with others less familiar with the PLC model, the attraction such practice holds for securing improvements within our education system. My visit was further enriched by the particular attention given to me by branch members, Courtney Pitt and Ed Lester who ensured that I fully experienced the sights and atmosphere of the “Windy City”!

Similarly, in Richmond Virginia, I received warm and generous hospitality from hosts Bob and Jinny Goodman who showed sincere interest in my area of study and contributed greatly to my knowledge of American history! Again I welcomed the opportunity to speak to branch members about my study visit at a convivial evening reception held at the beautiful home of branch president, Ellen Le Compte. I was also privileged to undertake visits to two schools in the area, which provided me with further insights into how the diversity of learning needs can be successfully met.

One notable highlight of my visit was the opportunity to attend a collaborative dramatic production of “Twelfth Night”, sponsored by the ESU, involving students from several schools in the Richmond area. The combination of talent and enthusiasm, which oozed from the actors at this “Bardathon”, underlined the mission of the ESU in “creating global understanding through English”.

The opportunity to link with ESU branch members in both cities undoubtedly added to the cultural exchange of ideas on which the Page Scholarship rests and contributed immeasurably to my own personal experience of the U.S.A.

So, what is a Professional Learning Community?

A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work **interdependently** to achieve **common goals** linked to the purpose of learning for all.

(DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006)

The key questions asked in a PLC are:

- What do we want our students to know?
- How know do we that they have learned it?
- What are we going to do if they have/have not learned?
- What do we do with those students who have learned it?

The essential components of a PLC:

- Focus on Learning
- Focus on collaborative culture
- Focus on results
- Provide timely, relevant feedback

A Professional Learning Community in Action:

Francis Howell School District, St Louis, is a District committed to the continuation of the Professional Learning Community school improvement model. Here I visited 2 schools: Francis Howell Central High (Principal – Dr William Arnel) and Henderson Elementary, (Principal – Dr Jennette Barker). Implemented at District level 6 years ago, the PLC model has now expanded to all schools that comprise the District.

Within FHCHS there are 26 PLC teams in action. Each group is led by a Team Leader who undergoes training in leadership skills to ensure that group time remains focused and is used effectively. Outcomes of group discussions are recorded by another member of the group. Norms are agreed upon at the group's inaugural meeting which establishes the protocol governing group activity.

At the heart of PLC activity is the determination of common assessments from which pupil progress is measured and analysed. Rigorous scrutiny is applied to analysing the data generated by assessments which leads teams into rich discussion on the key questions asked by PLCs outlined above. The data is seen as driving forward collaborative practice as all members in the group are **mutually accountable** for supporting individual students in helping them to reach their potential. The impact of collaborative dialogue (as I experienced in observing teams in their meetings) is felt most powerfully during conversations on the content of assessments and the resultant data.

There was a commitment by each group to ensuring that all students undertaking the course at the same grade level were exposed to the same course content and skills thereby making certain that students received an equitable experience and had covered the same ground as their peers by which their progress could be formatively assessed and reviewed.

The sharing of good practice is a product of the common assessment and has undoubtedly contributed to an increase in levels attained by students in FHCHS especially in Maths and English.

The use of assessment data is rigorous and is monitored closely by the school's team of Administrators. The data is used to plan interventions to improve students' learning potential.

In Maths, there is flexibility in teaching where timetabling allows: 2 classes are split to enable the top end to undertake extension work while another group works on consolidation of the same topic. Students can also opt into a maths 'Success Class' where senior students provide mentoring support to younger students under the direction of the class teacher.

Membership of PLCs within FHCHS is curricular based and includes teachers who are delivering 'Honors', 'SpEd' (Special Education) and Mainstream courses.

One afternoon each week is timetabled as PLC planning time. A half day each month is also set aside for whole school discussion and reflection of PLC issues which can involve network meetings with colleagues in other District schools.

So, what are the challenges for PLC working at FHCHS?

Dr William Arnel, Principal, acknowledged that the top down implementation of PLC practice had not been the most effective means of engaging teacher commitment. As Michael Fullan (2007) cited in DuFour et al (2008) comments,

"Top-down change doesn't work because it fails to garner ownership, commitment, or even clarity about the nature of reform. Bottom-up change-so called let a thousand flowers bloom-does not produce success on any scale. A thousand flowers do not bloom and those that do are not perennial." p.11

Several Principals I spoke to (notably in Fairfax, Virginia) drew on the terminology 'loose' and 'tight' (Dufour et al 2008), to describe the manner in which schools organise themselves around the PLC model. The purpose and key actions of the school and the boundaries within which they must operate are seen as (tight), but there is also the scope to be innovative, independent and empowered (loose).

It was further acknowledged by Dr Arnel that not all staff had found the shift from independent working practices to collaborative sharing of ideas and opinions a comfortable move. After all, a well-established structure and culture had existed within the school and PLC working demanded a change to less familiar and at times, uncomfortable territory, a theme echoed in conversations with Administrators of Chantilly High School, Fairfax, Virginia.

Nonetheless, the commitment of the school's Administrators to build-in capacity for leadership within PLC groups, paved the way for teachers to recognise that the PLC process did impact positively on students' performance and as evidenced by the data, had contributed to improvements in levels of attainment.

The journey continues at Henderson Elementary.....

A feeder school for Francis Howell Central High, Henderson Elementary has used the PLC model this academic session (2009-2010) to focus on improvements in non-fiction writing. Every PLC within the school set a SMART goal that measured pupil progress in this area.

PLCs created timelines, tied a curriculum map to content and vocabulary, decided upon common rubrics and set criteria for assessment of students' work both of which were shared horizontally at grade level and vertically. Regular analysis of students' performance data at PLC meetings, has been used to plan appropriate interventions which class teachers and literacy coaches can undertake to support improvements in students' learning.

The commitment of the staff to PLC working was self-evident from the manner in which meetings were conducted and the ensuing interventions realised.

Henderson Elementary views itself as a 'collaborative team' which promotes high levels of achievement by:

'Establishing interventions to meet all needs and
Supporting a challenging student-centred curriculum with high expectations'

(Henderson Elementary – Mission, Vision and Values)

My visits to FHCHS District revealed from the outset how a PLC looks in practice: a whole school community committed to driving forward improvements at the individual student level, achieved through collaborative team planning and guided by a collegiate understanding of the school's mission, vision, values and goals.

Further Destinations

My initial grounding in the workings of PLCs in St Louis, Missouri soundly prepared me for further insights into PLC practice as experienced in other States. Although geographically and culturally diverse, the manner in which PLCs had been established in schools in Illinois, Virginia and Upstate New York, showed striking similarities to the model I had been exposed to in

St Louis. The issues and challenges remained the same even for those schools, which had cut their teeth on the practice several years previously. Engagement of staff, a commitment to continuous improvement, building capacity for leadership, reflection on pedagogy, developing and disseminating curriculum materials and a commitment to professional development through familiarity with current research and practice were key areas for development.

Schools, which are truly committed to the PLC model, strive for continuous measurable improvement.

At Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Illinois, (enrolment 4,325(!) and the only public high school in Illinois to receive four Blue Ribbon Awards for Excellence in Education from the U.S. Department of Education), the challenge is now to establish the school as an authentic learning community, where sustained excellence becomes the key focus.

Fairfax County Public Schools, District in Virginia, the twelfth largest school system in the nation, has at its core the principle of PLC working. Elementary, Middle and High Schools define the practice of operating as a learning community in their stated mission, vision, values and goals. Prospective applicants for vacancies are informed in advance of the principles on which schools in the district operate and through which measurable success is delivered.

At James Madison High School, the PLC process was introduced in 2002 and from that point onward, the school has endeavoured to function as a PLC characterised by a collaborative culture. As stated by Mark Merrell, Principal in a memorandum to PLC Team leaders,

"Teacher isolation is replaced with collaborative processes that are deeply embedded into the daily life of the school. Members of a PLC are not invited to work with colleagues: They are called upon to be contributing members of a collaborative effort to improve the school's capacity to help all students learn at high levels." (September 2009)

No matter what the size of a school district, I found that schools faced similar challenges of embedding PLC principles in routine practices. Existent cultural norms, routines and established patterns of behaviour sought to chicanery the smooth adoption of PLC working. However, the commitment of Administrators to the principles of PLC working and the modelling of such practice themselves seemed the key motivator for engaging staff in the process.

Windsor School District, New York comprising a High School, Middle School and 3 Elementary schools (2000 students) has adopted the PLC model throughout the District. Engagement by schools in the process was achieved relatively quickly; the challenge now however, is to develop capacity within individual teams to work collaboratively on making improvements for all students.

The role of PLC Team leaders (coaches) is seen as crucial to the development of leadership capacity within the schools and teachers are supported in undertaking two days training at the PLC Coaching Academy. The cascading and dissemination of good practice gleaned from training at the Coaching Academy is the role of the PLC teacher leaders. The groundswell of interest in becoming involved in leadership opportunities was evidenced from the enthusiasm displayed by those involved in the process, at Palmer Elementary.

In conclusion, my study visit revealed the immense power that schools exert when working as a Professional Learning Community characterised by a collaborative culture. The assessment data provided the unequivocal evidence (if such were needed) that the sum of working together is unquestionably more effective than working in isolation.

As we now embark on Curriculum for Excellence, it must be recognised that students achieve a much richer and fulfilling educational experience when teachers combine their skills and expertise to provide the very best possible teaching experiences and learning outcomes for all.

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Francis Howell School District, St Louis Missouri:

Francis Howell Central High School
Principal – Dr Sonny Arnel

Henderson Elementary
Principal – Dr Jennette Barker

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Adlai E. Stevenson High School
Superintendent – Dr Eric Twadell

Addams Junior High School
Principal – Steve Pearce

Fairview Elementary
Principal – Beth Erbach

Richmond School District, Virginia

Woodville Elementary School
Principal – Rosalind Taylor

New Community School, Richmond Virginia

Principal – Julia Ann Greenwood

Fairfax Public Schools District

Assistant Superintendent (Instructional Services) – Peter J. Noonan
Director ESOL – Teddi Predaris

Rachel Carson Middle School
Principal-August Frattali

Chantilly High School
Principal-James Kacur

Fairfax Public Schools District (cont)

Rocky Run Elementary School
Principal-Mark Greenfelder

Fairfax High School
Principal-David Goldfarb

Madison High School
Principal-Mark Merrell

Windsor School District, New York

Superintendent of Schools -Jason Andrews
Assistant Superintendent for Instruction – Dr Ed Klesse

Windsor High School
Associate Principal – Jeffrey Salasney

Windsor Middle School
Principal- Scott Beattie

Palmer Elementary School
Principal-Jamie Bernard

Bell Elementary School
Principal- Frances Kennedy

Weeks Elementary School
Principal-Lisa Milano

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