

Physical Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Support Mechanisms within Contemporary Professional Development

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Introduction

High expectations for educational performance have resulted in professional development (PD) being critical in facilitating learning among teachers (Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006). Professional learning communities (PLCs), as a form of PD, have potential for increasing teacher learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Although support within PLCs has been identified as necessary within the PD literature; it has not been well defined or studied (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of support mechanisms within professional learning communities (PLCs).

- What are the types of support mechanisms within a PLC?
- What do physical education teachers perceive as the nature of support mechanisms within PLCs?

Nature of Support between People

Share Ideas & Resources	Personal Connection	Helpfulness	Humor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members exchanged ideas, resources, and use best practices with PLC members at meetings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLC members mentioned spending time outside of meetings and taking a personal interest in one another's personal lives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email exchange and opportunity to observe each other, allowed for PLC members to freely disseminate information and help one another. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humor and joking among PLC members indicated a level of camaraderie and ability to express themselves freely in their own environment.

"We have our own equipment so we would try to train people if we were to get pedometers or Bosu® balls, we would try to have a meeting about that." (Focus Group G)

"I think a lot of us are friends outside of the group, too." (Focus Group D)

"They'll [PLC members] get back to you and tell you what you need to know or if they don't know they'll help you go somewhere else to go find it." (Focus Group D)

"The teachers were very candid when speaking with one another and joked about some of the things they were asked to do in their own schools." (Field Notes)

Methods

Participants

- Thirty four (34) elementary physical education teachers representing three active PLCs in the inter-mountain west region of the United States.

Data Sources

- Three one hour semi-structured focus group interviews
- Informal conversational interviews
- Follow-up interviews
- Field notes from 7 PLC meetings
- Artifacts (e.g. email messages, meeting agendas, and handouts)

Data Analysis

- Data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007). Trustworthiness was established through: a) triangulation, b) member checks, c) researcher position, d) peer review, and e) an audit trail.

Nature of Support within Environment

Diversity	Inclusivity	Relaxed Atmosphere	Food/Drink
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of the PLC (yrs. of experience, varied knowledge, and school type) allowed for veteran and new teachers to learn from one another. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLC members expressed a purposeful need to create an inclusive environment where new and existing members feel welcome. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLC meetings occurred in familiar surroundings and were lead by individuals joining the group who fostered a laid back environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food was provided at several PLC meetings and allowed for informal socialization and gratitude among members.

"Everybody from 20-year teachers to first year teachers; we all pull from each other because we are doing the same thing." (Focus Group D)

"We are all super open to new people. I mean anytime we have new teachers we are like, what do you need?" (Focus Group G)

"The teachers did not wait for an introduction to begin the meeting. It was apparent that T was the facilitator; however, he did not begin the meeting with any formal welcome." (Field Notes)

"Another pro is when K brings in his little Cliff bars; we always get Cliff bars. That is really nice." (Focus Group A)

Results

Two types of support mechanisms appeared within these PLCs:

1. **Support between people** consisted of all interpersonal interactions that assisted with the professional growth and development of the participants.
2. **Support within environment** included a variety of human and temporal structures.

Analysis revealed the **nature of support between people** was manifested by: **joking/humor, personal connection, helpfulness, and sharing ideas/resources.**

The **nature of support within the environment** was exhibited through: **diversity, inclusivity, relaxed atmosphere, and food/drink.**

- The types of support mechanisms within the PLCs resulted from both purposeful planning and incidental occurrences within meetings.
- The nature of support between people within the PLCs fostered opportunities for individuals to develop relationships in a social context, leading to professional growth and learning.
- The nature of support within the environment strengthened the need for PD meeting places to be welcoming places for teachers to learn.
- Participants identified their own learning needs within each PLC. The resulting support mechanisms aligned with these needs thus making PD meaningful.
- The nature of the support mechanisms as identified by the participants may ultimately assist teachers with their professional learning and teaching practice.

Conclusions and Discussion