School Principals’ Roles in Establishing Collaborative Professional Learning Communities at Schools

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Abstract

In education teachers’ individual and collective efforts are essential in order to improve student learning and realize reforms successfully. In this respect, capacity development is very important at schools. Capacity development is a complicated state based on motivation, skill development, learning, positive organizational culture and support mechanisms. It is believed that establishing professional learning communities develops capacity and improves students’ learning at school. In order to develop capacity and maintain it, establishing “professional learning communities” at school is one of the administrative roles that school principals should fulfil. As far as capacity development is concerned, it is more important for school principals to establish collaborative professional learning communities at schools than ever. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to present what principal roles in establishing professional earning communities are in the current system. The research was conducted qualitatively and the data were collected through interviews with 15 principals. Results reveal that school principals have significant roles establishing professional learning communities. However, they do not perform this role adequately.

1. Introduction

Researches reveal that collaboration is an effective strategy for improving student learning at schools (Darling-
Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Little, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Slater, 2008). Collaboration among teachers, when used effectively, is one strategy that has proven itself as a useful practice to improve instruction and provide student achievement. It is claimed that establishing collaborative learning communities affects schools in many ways ranging from instructional climate to instructional results, staff engagement, staff improvement (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Little, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Newmann, King & Youngs, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Slater, 2008).

There is consensus among education experts that creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers is the sole way to improve student learning (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). In this regard, Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, & Louis (2009) argue that principals have critical roles in creating a collaborative environment. However, there is certain fundamental knowledge and skills that principals must possess and do in order to create a collaborative workplace environment for teachers (National Staff Development Council (NSDC), 2003).

2. School Principals’ Roles in Establishing Collaborative Professional Learning Communities

As instructional leaders, principals are in a unique position to influence collaboration that takes place among teachers. In order to create a collaborative environment for teachers, principals should have deep knowledge, skills about professional learning communities and initiation to realize it. In this respect, Murphy et al. (2009) argue that distributed leadership helps them change instructional practices. Similarly, Heck & Hallinger, (2005), Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt (1998), Sergiovanni (1998) indicate that as instructional leaders principals can make a difference in terms of student learning at their schools.

According to Barth (1986), in this role, principals are considered omniscient in their understanding of effective teaching and learning practices. In the new way of thinking, new roles are defined in many ways. Schmoker (2005) claims that the leader’s function is to provide opportunities for teachers to work together in self-managing teams to improve their own instruction, always with the expectation for improved learning. All teachers work on improving their own instruction as they exercise their right to lead, and the designated leader’s role is to facilitate these processes (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008; Murphy et al., 2009).

In this manner, in order to create a collaborative environment, school principals must group teachers into effective teams for effective collaboration, believe in the inherent ability of teachers to serve in leadership capacities, provide, encourage and expect participation opportunities for staff involvement in important decisions, empower leadership teams to make decisions and encourage risk-taking. They must also rotate leadership roles among staff (NSDC, 2003; Pounder, Ogawa & Adams, 1995; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005).

Marzano et al. (2005) refer to this redistribution of power as input, or the extent to which the school leader involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies. They argue that leaders should manifest some specific skills when applying this tenet. These may include:

- providing opportunities for staff to be involved in developing school policies,
- providing opportunities for staff input on all important decisions, and
- using leadership teams in decision making (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 52).

Teachers may develop their instructional practices when they learn by doing. In other words, many educators believe that student learning can improve when teachers are also engaged in learning activities. When professional development is in progress, shared, and closely connected to teaching and learning, teacher capacity grows accordingly.

According to Bryk, Camburn & Louis (1999) professional community is social trust among faculty members. When teachers trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting collaboration, reflective dialogue. Also, Bryk and Schneider (2002) subsequently identified four dimensions of relational trust. These are; respect, competence, personal regard for others and integrity. Trust instrumentally affects students’ engagement and learning because teachers’ vulnerability is reduced and they are more willing to engage in public problem solving and the principal is the key person in developing relational trust, both in demonstrating it, and in the way they foster a culture where relationships are trusted.

By creating collaborative learning communities or teams, teachers benefit from the insights of their colleagues, which offers good source for their own professional capacity. When schools establish collaborative shared work culture, the term learning organizations becomes professional learning communities in schools (Dufour & Eaker,
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By creating a professional learning community, principals create an environment encouraging mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth, which cannot be accomplished alone. These professional learning communities are identified as professional collaboration to improve student learning. According to Leonard & Leonard (2001) professional collaboration is provided when teachers and administrators work together, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans to reach educational and organizational goals. In practice, collaborative practice is exemplified when school staff members come together on a regular basis in their continuing attempts so that their students can become more successful learners. In this respect, Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton & Kleiner (2000) claims that if principals become the “lead teacher and lead learner”, they can move beyond traditional leadership styles to create professional learning communities. The basic goal here is to develop people at school. Teachers must be comfortable to challenge their own and others’ assumptions and beliefs within safe places to learn together at school, (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

According to Seashore, Anderson, and Riedel (2003) professional learning community is a type of teacher sharing, and focuses on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes. The idea here is that what teachers do together outside of the classroom can be as important as what they do inside in affecting school restructuring, teachers’ professional development, and student learning.

In such communities, teachers develop in their profession. It requires some characteristics. One of them is mutual trust, respect and support among staff members. In this frame teachers and school leaders should support each other and the school should be a wide community rather than smaller groups of staff. The other one is openness, networks and partnerships which means to look beyond the school for sources of learning and ideas (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood, Hawkey, Ingram, Atkinson and Smith 2005; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Stoll, 2006). In this frame, King and Newmann (2001) highlight that high quality instruction depends upon the competence and attitudes of each individual teacher but when it is collective its outputs are greater. Leadership is therefore an important resource for professional learning communities in terms of head teacher/principal commitment and shared leadership (Mulford & Silins, 2003).

The idea of community emphasises mutually supportive relationships and developing shared norms and values whereas the focus on professionals and professionalism is towards the acquisition of knowledge and skills, orientation to clients and professional autonomy. This can lead to tensions not least in matters concerned with the regulation of teacher behaviour (Louis, Kruse & Bryk, 1995; McMahon, 2001a) and operation of any performance-related pay systems.

Fullan (2001) has concluded that effective schools establish professionally collaborative cultures and argues that attention should shift from focusing on individuals (e.g. merit pay, career ladders etc) to developing schools as professional learning communities. Furthermore, Little (2002) reports that professional community is an important contributor to instructional improvement and school reform. Andrews and Lewis (2007) also claim that teachers who develop professional learning communities do not only enhance their knowledge, but they also have a significant impact on their classroom work. In this regard Cordingley, Bell, Rundell & Evans (2003) state that collaborative schools can have a positive impact on teachers and pupils. In these schools teacher behaviours change and teachers have greater confidence, enhanced beliefs and development of enthusiasm for collaborative working. In these communities this may lead to positive attitudes in school-based activity, observation, feedback, an emphasis on peer support, processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue, and processes for sustaining the practices in their own classroom settings. Hargreaves and Giles (2003) claim that teachers bring knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers in a school or across schools to promote shared learning and improvement. In this respect, a strong professional learning community is a social process for turning information into knowledge. As stated above, teachers’ collective efforts are very important to improve student outcomes at school and school principals’ roles become more crucial accordingly. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to find out what principal roles in establishing professional learning community and how effectively they perform this role at school.
3. Research Methodology

This study was carried out qualitatively. These types of research studies are used to gain in-depth knowledge in a study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Ethnographic designs, as Creswell (2002) described them, are qualitative research procedures for describing, analysing, and interpreting a culture-sharing group’s shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time (p. 481). As such, by using this research design and utilizing in-depth interviews, the study explored culture-sharing behaviours, beliefs, and language among principals in Turkey. Principals’ views were obtained through interviews with semi-structured questions, as recommended by Bogdan & Biklen (1998), to get the subjects to freely express their thoughts around particular topics (p.3).

3.1 Working Group

The working group was determined by purposive sampling method that was described as the best used with small numbers of individuals/groups which may well be sufficient for understanding human perceptions, problems, needs, behaviors and contexts, which are the main justification for a qualitative audience research. Purposive sampling is particularly relevant when the desired population for the study is rare or very difficult to locate and recruit for a study. The advantage of purpose sampling is that the researcher can use prior knowledge to choose respondents (Bailey, 1994, p.96). The participants were 15 school principals at 15 state schools in Istanbul province, in 2014-2015 academic year in Turkey. The participants consisted of 13 male, 2 female principals.

3.2 Data Collection and analysis

In this study, the data were collected by using the following procedure. First, in an e-mail the school principals were informed about the purpose of the study, and they were asked if they could participate in the research voluntarily. The volunteer principals were invited to take part in the research consented after being assured of the confidentiality of the data to be gathered from them. It was promised that their identities would be kept in secret and their names would not be mentioned in any part of the study or shared with anyone else. Second, an interview was planned on an agreed-upon day with those who accepted the invitation, and the participants were visited on that date. The interviews were both recorded and noted with their permission and each took approximately 45-50 minutes. To analyse the collected data, content analysis method was used. This method aims to gather similar data on a topic to comment on it (Mayring, 2000).

The first step taken in the analysis of the data was the data organization procedures recommended by Bogdan&Biklen (1998). In organizing the data, the researcher revisited each interviewer and listened to each audiotape while reviewing the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of described by Bogdan&Biklen (1998), which call for development of coding categories, mechanical sorting of the data, later, on repeated themes among the interviews was grouped into coding categories. They were coded as Principal 1 (P 1), Principal 2 (P 2), Principal 3 (P 3). The constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1992) was used in the process of organizing and analysing the data. The use of the constant comparative method results in the saturation of categories and the emergence of theory. The data were collected mainly with the following semi-structured questions: Do you know professional learning communities? If so, how do you describe professional learning communities? Do you establish professional learning communities at school such as teams? And how do you establish them? How effectively do you organize these communities?

3.3 Trustworthiness and rigor

Here, the interviewer played the role of facilitator and listener without leading the participants. Interviews have been widely used lately as they provide in-depth answers. The locations were chosen to avoid being affected by power relations.

There are also several limitations of this research. First of all, the sample was one of volunteers and they may not necessarily be representative of other principals. In the second place, the researcher was the main instrument of data analysis.
4 Findings

School principals views on their roles in establishing professional communities at their schools were analysed in this research and a number of findings were obtained. Some of the principals’ thoughts were given here. According to one of the principal;

“As principals, we know that professional communities are teams which have same goals. We establish these communities at schools of course. In fact, we do these kinds of things but we do not name them as professional learning communities” (P 1)

Another Principal indicates that;

“I know what a professional learning community is. However, with excessive work load of both teachers and us, it is a dream for us. I start work at 7 in the morning and leave work at 7 every day. Sometimes we have to be at schools at weekends as there are national exams at our schools. Most of the time we cannot find time to these academic issues because of our daily office work.” (P 5)

One of the principals argue that,

“When I first started my work as a principal, it was easy for me to do that, because I was eager to try those kinds of things. Then, the school posed on me a lot of unnecessary work, some of which can be conducted by an office clerk. Therefore, I cannot find time to establish such communities and follow what they are doing. We know what they are and how beneficial they are but it is a matter of time and workload we already have.” (P 9)

An experienced principal states;

“I know what a professional learning community is. However, it is the matter of time and qualified teachers. I put extra effort to bring them together. What we are currently doing here is to do paper work and interviews with teachers, parents and some other people and running from a meeting to another, which are mostly outside school and takes all our day. Therefore, it is impossible to spend time on these kinds of things” (P 8)

A young woman principal states that,

“I group teachers into teams when an important decision is about to be taken. I believe teachers’ ability to show their leadership capacities. When staff involvement in important decisions is provided, they feel better. In other words, encouraging them to take part in decision making process makes them feel better. I obtain good results by establishing these teams. It is difficult but worth trying. “(P14)

Another principal says that;

“Establishing these kinds of teams is considered magic. However, it does not work properly in practice. When they are not organized well, they may cause more problems at school and then you will have to spend most of your time to solve these problems them. To know all about establishing these communities does not guarantee their success” (P15).

Another principal remarked,

“Principals need to carry out their on daily basis, but we can focus only on daily chores. I often do paperwork, answer phones and rush from a meeting to another. Therefore, I do not have time for other things like establishing professional teams (P10).”

A principal claimed;

“Nowadays, I have no time left from my daily workload. I cannot define my profession as school administration. Indeed, I pretend to manage. In other words, we carry out our basic administrative tasks. The Ministry wants us to manage the school causing no problems. (P2).”

Another principal revealed;

“My role requires doing so many routine things. For this reason, I have a heavy work routine. Sometimes I cannot do anything except for paperwork, rushing to different meetings and answering phones (P6).”

As can be understood from some of the statements given above, school principals are in circuit of official work
during the day and this means that they have no time to plan academic facilities as well as establishing professional learning communities.

5 Conclusion and discussion

Through this study, it was aimed to find out school principals’ roles in establishing professional communities at their schools and their skills to make them work effectively in order to realize school goals. A number of results were obtained.

According to one of the results, school principals know what professional learning communities are. They are also aware of their benefits. However, they think that they cannot perform this role adequately due to their excessive administrative roles that they have to conduct on daily basis. The school principals interviewed here emphasize that they have too much paperwork and daily basis such as answering official reports, letters, making phone calls, having interviews with parents, teachers and students. Therefore, they claim that although they know what establishing professional learning communities is they have no time, power and also authority for teachers’ professional development. Most probably this stems from their workload on daily basis. In fact, it is considered that they have to deal with a lot of problems ranging from repairing broken taps and windows to providing a peaceful atmosphere for both teachers and students at school.

It can be concluded from this research that principals can describe these communities and also find these communities beneficial. However, they cannot make these teams work effectively. In order to make them work properly, principals should also guide communities toward self-governance. Particularly, effective learning communities are democratic and participatory. Although principals may take the lead in arranging meetings at first, over time, urge community members to assume prominent roles. They should share authority and decision making to prepare teachers to take the lead. In this respect, it is considered that self-governance will both help professional learning communities continue and boost teachers' feelings of professionalism. In one of their studies, Visscher & Witziers (2004) concluded that shared goals, joint decision-making, shared responsibilities, consultation and advice are important but insufficient to improve educational practice and, consequently, student achievement. In another study, Lee and Smith (1996) found that achievement gains for eighth and tenth grade students were significantly higher in schools where teachers took collective responsibility for students’ academic success or failure. Also in a similar study, Crowther (2001) suggests that, within the community, pedagogic leadership works in parallel with strategic leadership as teacher leaders and administrative leaders develop new roles and relationships within the school. Moreover, Harris (2003) concludes that if we are serious about building professional learning communities within and between schools then we need forms of leadership that support and nourish meaningful collaboration among teachers.

The results obtained through this study reveal that principals of this sample are aware of “professional learning communities” and their benefits for their schools. Nevertheless, they have no or limited time, authority, power or interest in putting them into practice. This means that school principals spend most of their time on managerial tasks and office work like paperwork, meetings, daily rush like answering official reports, letters, meeting people, teachers and students. This may also mean that principals spend less time on academic purposes such as establishing professional learning communities. It can be concluded that although administrative tasks are important in school administration process, educational purposes and pedagogic goals should not be ignored. In this respect, school principals should have time for educational purposes by establishing professional learning communities and make them perform effectively. However, it is considered that school principals change their role priorities during their administrative practices on daily basis. It is certain that principals’ basic aim is to improve the education, teaching and learning which will lead to student achievement. Therefore, they should spend most of their time and energy on academic and pedagogic goals as well as administrative issues. This does not mean that other management aspects are less important in the school administration process. Indeed, they should balance their roles and none of these roles should be neglected.

Taking everything into consideration, in order to establish professional learning communities, principals should make the data accessible for all members at school. It is clear that an effective learning community is a skill in using data for instructional decision making. Principals may need to help teachers acquire skills needed to interpret data. In addition, they should also teach discussion and decision-making skills. If collaboration is new at school, principals should help teachers develop their skills in talking and making decisions together. It is considered that discussion is a good choice when the goal is to make a decision about an action. In this form, learning communities
should know different strategies to finalize decisions, including voting and establishing. They should show teachers the research. Research indicates that teachers benefit from research results especially for student success, increased understanding of teachers' roles in helping students achieve, feedback and assistance from peers, and professional development.

Last but not least, the research also shows that learning in a social context is deeper than independent learning. This may be valid for professional development. Furthermore, principals should take time to build trust among teachers. Professional community can be effective only if mutual trust exists between the teachers and the principal as well as among teachers themselves. It is certain that teachers will never express themselves frankly if they fear from their colleagues and principals.

To conclude, in order to create such communities, principals should implement some approaches. Firstly, they should emphasize teachers that they can succeed together. Especially, at schools with a history of low achievement. In such schools, teachers can be told to believe their expertise in student learning. Moreover, they should expect teachers to keep their knowledge fresh. For this reason, principals should let teachers know you expect them to keep their skills up-to-date through collaborative study. They can do this by subscribing to a body of knowledge and monitoring the latest information and skills to increase their effectiveness.

6 Implications for the Future
The recommendations reached through the results obtained in this study and implications for further research and practitioners are below:

- It is suggested that giving teachers guided practice in conducting appropriate conversations, making decisions, and managing conflict should help strengthen trust. Therefore, it will keep the focus on building student and teacher learning.
- School principals should be substituted by a co-principal. In this case, they can find time to organize professional learning communities by delegating some workload to them.
- Establishing these kinds of communities is not enough. Principals should follow if these groups function effectively.

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