**A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050**

**Professional Learning Communities in a Pandemic**

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## Professional Learning Communities in a Pandemic

This paper will describe one aspiration for the future of education, specifically, how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within a pandemic might enhance both staff and student engagement. Broadly, PLCs are defined as a group of people "sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning oriented, growth promoting way" (Bolam et al., 2005, p. 5; Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 2). Globally, PLCs have been widely introduced into the educational framework, and it is easy to see why. Effective, sustainable PLCs affect classroom instruction and teaching culture. "Learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning" (Vescio et al., 2007, p. 88). Teachers who participate in PLCs acquire knowledge and skills about their own teaching practices or the subject they are teaching (Prenger et al., 2019), while students benefit from "the introduction of personalized learning journals for all pupils in the PLC, an increased number of assessment for learning strategies, the development of materials to promote learning conversations between staff and pupils, and a clear focus on securing better learner engagement" (Harris & Jones, 2010, pp. 177-178).

When considering UNESCO 2050, the concept of *Learning to Become* allows for innovation and ownership of the future to be considered both locally and globally (2019). *Learning to Become* "points to a philosophy of education and an approach to pedagogy that views learning as a process of continual unfolding that is ongoing and life-long... [it] invokes the need to develop the capacity to imagine a good and fulfilling life" (UNESCO, 2019). PLCs at their core do precisely this. They not only support learning for students, but staff as well by focusing on professional learning within a cohesive group of school personnel dedicated to increasing the collective knowledge. (Stoll & Louis, 2007).

The importance of PLCs in a pandemic cannot be understated. In response to COVID-19 educators, drawing on their professional knowledge, were able to "collaboratively mobilize with a resourcefulness and creativity that could not have been achieved by a public authority simply issuing top-down orders" (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p. 13). With this statement, UNESCO is calling for the professional expertise of teachers to be valued, and for the creation of conditions that give educators the flexibility and autonomy to act collaboratively (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p. 13). The collaborative expertise cultivated by PLCs will continue to create capacity for teachers to initiate, experiment, and innovate to best support their students.

## Opinions and Experiences

PLCs have been a facet in Alberta education for an extended period of time. In the spring of 2004, every public school in the province was mandated to become a PLC by the Government of Alberta (Tarnoczi, 2005, p. 4). The extended period of PLC development in Alberta schools has led to diverse opinions and experiences of educators and experts. Building on the relationships between participants, PLCs overcome the tendency for teachers to work in isolation, instead allowing them to be surrounded with people who have the same frustrations and are struggling with the same problems (Liberman, 2007, p. 201). Others can interpret this same relationship building as "management technology to modify, what educational authorities consider, undesirable behaviour" (Tarnoczi, 2005, p. 13).

The focus of PLCs to entrench teachers into cycles of action research and group inquiry to improve student learning can also be met with positive and negative perspectives. While the cycle of action research can "release professional energy, distribute professional knowledge, engage professional commitment, and unleash creative forces" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2007, p.

41), it can also be considered some "enforc[ing] the view that teachers cannot and should not feel grounded as educational experts" (Tarnoczi, 2005, p. 18).

These vast differences of opinions and experiences between educators and experts relating to PLCs create tensions between those who view their experiences as positive, and those who view them as negative, resulting in an "us" versus "them" divide among educators and experts.
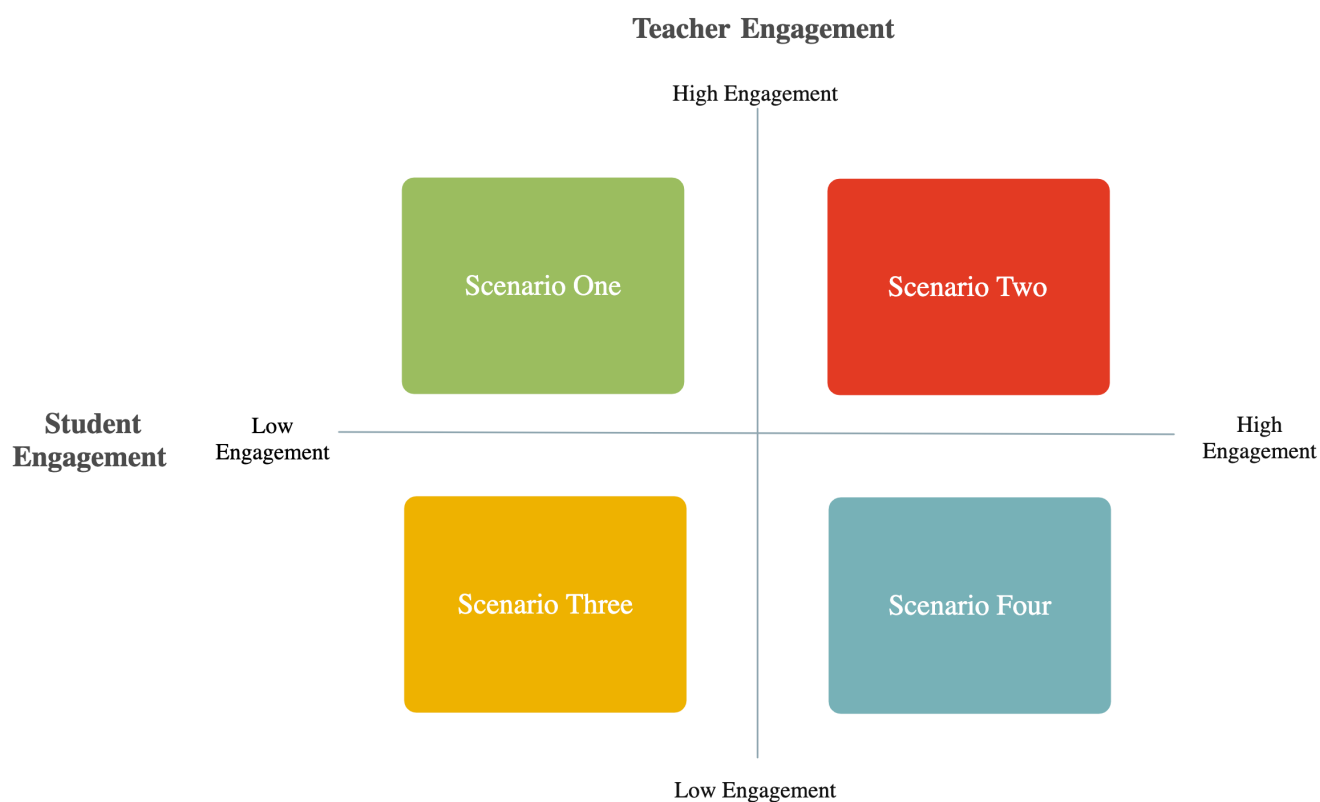
### Scenarios for Professional Learning Communities

The wide differences of opinions and experiences between educators and experts relating to PLCs, allow us to imagine four distinct scenarios that can exist when taking into consideration teacher and student engagement. Each of these scenarios carries its own implications for how educators function within, and the impact of, PLCs. When considering student engagement, we can use the four Pillars of Education outlined by Delors (2013) in his speech at the opening of the International Congress on Lifelong Learning in Donostia/San Sebastia´n, Spain: *Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.* Learning to know is both thirsting and acquiring a body of knowledge throughout one's life after leaving school while learning to do is incorporating the knowledge and methods learned into skills  (Delors, 2013, pp. 321-322). Learning to live together is the ability of individuals to build tolerance and relationship with those in their communities and learning to be is "enabling people to understand themselves better, without sinking into despair or delusion" (Delors, 2013, p. 322). The promise was that these four pillars combined can allow us to gauge student engagement within the education system.

Teacher engagement is evident through the shared commitment to student engagement. Teachers experience a multifaceted, rich, and respectful environment, where professional

knowledge is distributed, professional commitment is engaged, creative forces are unleashed, and professional energy is released (Mitchell & Sackney, 2007). Teachers feel comfortable "to take initiative, to take risks, and to make autonomous decisions, and they are supported as they move forward into new and challenging territory" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2007, p. 41)

When considering student engagement alongside teacher engagement in PLCs, four distinct scenarios of PLCs within a pandemic emerge.

**Teacher Engagement**

High Engagement

| | |
|---|---|
| Scenario One | Scenario Two |

**Student Engagement**     Low Engagement                                                 High Engagement

| | |
|---|---|
| Scenario Three | Scenario Four |

Low Engagement

**Scenario One**

In this scenario, teachers are fully engaged in the work of a PLC, but students experience low levels of engagement in their learning. They are not interested in, or passionate about their school experiences, resulting in low motivation. Teachers feel comfortable working with their colleagues and taking risks, allowing issues and challenges to be resolved as they arise. Students,

comparatively, experience an environment where they do not feel respected or considered. They do not have opportunities to focus their learning on personal interests, and do not feel they have a place in the school. They often lose face and feel embarrassed in front of their peers.

**Scenario Two**

In this scenario, both teachers and students are fully engaged. This would be the ideal school setting for both students and teachers. Students will have the opportunity to participate in many experiences, both curricular and co/extracurricular. The unique contributions of students are celebrated, and their place within the school community is evident. Students' self-esteem and confidence grows, and they act as positive role models within the school community. Teachers experience collective ownership of the decisions, directions, and outcomes while having excitement over their own learning. They have many opportunities for professional development, increasing professional competence and confidence allowing them to act as role models for their colleagues and students.

**Scenario Three**

In this scenario, both teachers and students experience low levels of engagement. Neither teachers nor students feel respected. Students do not have opportunities to participate in various classroom experiences, and they are not supported in their attempts to meet performance and behaviour standards. Issues and challenges among teachers escalate while the opportunities for professional development and chances of success decrease. Teachers do not take risks or make autonomous decisions.

**Scenario Four**

In this scenario, teachers experience low levels of engagement, but students experience high levels of engagement. Students are recognized as individuals, peers know their name, and

they sense they have a place within the school acting as positive role models. They have many choices of co/extracurricular activities. Teachers, conversely, do not have professional confidence and competence to make autonomous decisions, and do not willingly enter challenging territory. Teachers do not work with other teachers, parents, or students.

Within each of these scenarios, the teachers and experts present may believe they are the "us" and the others are the "them" resulting in a divide among educators. Those who are in PLCs with low levels of teacher engagement believe PLCs are "turnstiles of transient teamwork where the mathematicians or stations and technocrats are now defining, delineating and diminishing what student learning and teacher professionalism will become" (Hargreaves, 2007, p 184), while members of PLCs with high engagement have enhanced beliefs in their ability to make a difference in student learning, greater confidence, enthusiasm for working collaboratively, and an increased commitment to changing their practices and trying new things (Bolam et al., 2005). When considering the cone of futures, the experience of the individual will impact if they perceive PLCs within a pandemic as a probable, plausible, or cancelled future. Those with experiences which result in beliefs as noted by Hargreaves (2007) will perceive PLCs as a cancelled future, while individuals who experience PLCs which create beliefs as outlined by Bolam et al (2005) with perceive PLCs as a probable future.

### A Thing from The Future: An Ideal PLC

When considering PLCs in a pandemic, ideally we must assume we are talking about PLCs with a high degree of teacher and student engagement and ways in which students will interact with education. Three settings are possible, fully in person, fully online, or a blended setting. A PLC within a pandemic must move with students and teachers between each of these

settings. UNESCO believes in quality education for all students, the way we achieve this in a pandemic is through PLCs.

The following frames a desired future for PLCs using the elements of a 'Thing from the Future" envisaged in the futures design-lab work of Stuart Candy (2018).

**Arc**

To consider a preferred future for PLCs within a pandemic, we need to ensure that we mitigate aspects that hinder PLC involvement, grow practices that cultivate successful PLCs and transform the PLCs pre-pandemic, to PLCs that support students and teachers within a pandemic. Often teachers are asked to perform duties related to the PLC that do not further the work of the PLC. These practices, including taking minutes and sending them to the principal (Brooks, 2016), or having PLCs be add-on teams where teaches are driven by data demanding immediate results (Hargreaves, 2007) create the impression that PLCs are "empty vessels into which we try to pour all our hopes and dreams for improving education" (Couture, 2003, para. 6). By ridding PLCs of these practices, and instead having PLC members working together, focusing on collective knowledge (Harris & Jones, 2010), remaining accountable, making effective use of their skill sets, connecting learning to doing, and operating with a strong sense of purpose (Easton, 2015), PLCs within a pandemic with flourish.

**Terrain**

PLCs within a pandemic will need to function regardless of the setting instruction is happening in as three possible settings are possible. By focusing on PLCs within a single school community, we can ensure they can seamlessly move between educational settings.  Time restraints, where time for collaboration is not built into the school day (Lujan & Day, 2010) is the biggest structural roadblock that will need to be overcome.

Environmental factors that hinder PLCs are external pressures from new initiatives, inspections, and other strategies that directly compete with PLCs. PLCs in a pandemic must be the central focus. PLCs cannot compete with other initiatives and COVID-19. PLCs must be "carefully positioned within the school so that they link with other development in an integral and coordinated way" (Harris & Jones, 2010, p. 279).

**Object**

PLCs within a pandemic will have many defining characteristics. They will have mandatory time set aside, during the instructional day when all members of the PLC can meet without interruptions and other commitments. This can be done through in person meetings or video calling technology. They will be the sole initiative taken on by the school community, ensuring that staff can focus on the work of the PLC. The PLC must be invested in doing the work while also being supportive and trusting of other members within the group (Bolam et al., 2005), addressing personal conflicts, being accountable and united, and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for all children (Henderson, 2018).

Leaders within school communities must ensure they actively build a context for PLCs to work (Harris & Jones, 2010). Principals must organize appropriate physical spaces, designated work areas and necessary materials, provide consistent support, and establish a climate of trust (Bouchamma et al., 2019). They must provide adequate time and resources, and guide their staff in creating and expressing a collective vision for students and the school itself (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Bolam et al., 2005).

**Mood**

PLCs within a pandemic will result in educators and students feeling both empowered and supported. Families will believe the school is doing well independent of the educational

setting with a sense of community prominent. Teachers and students will have a sense of belonging, and growth. The PLC will support teachers in developing professional competence and skills, while developing students' confidence and self-esteem.

### Implications of the Ideal PLC

PLCs within a pandemic will require changes to teacher timetables, administrative duties, and the overall school culture. Teacher timetables must change to ensure that they have both grade and subject level counterparts. This will allow meaningful, pointed collaboration between teachers specific to common curriculum. Teacher timetables must account for common meeting time between all members of the PLC. This time must be kept sacred by both teachers and administrators. This structured PLC time, and common grade and subject level groupings will allow teachers to "provide timely intervention or enrichment for specific students on specific skills" (Richardson, 2011, p. 30). This will be imperative to improving the ability of students to learn to know, and learn to do. Following the move to online learning in March 2020, many Alberta students become disengaged. By providing both enrichment and intervention to students, they can develop a thirst for knowledge that will stay with them after leaving school, and the ability to deal with the numerous challenges of working life (Delors, 2013, p. 322).

In addition to changing teacher timetables, administrative duties of teachers must also change. Teachers need to shift their focus away from additional initiatives and instead focus on the work of the PLC itself. Teachers need to become entrenched in the work of the PLC. When teachers must share their time among many initiatives, they become poised to seek shortcuts

> Rather than discuss essential curriculum with colleagues, they will argue the state standards or textbook establish the curriculum and will avoid the dialogue. Rather than working together to create team-developed common assessments, they will ask the

district to create or purchase assessments. Rather than using evidence of student learning

to inform and improve their practice, they will use common assessments merely to assign

grades. (Richardson, 2011, p. 32)

By ensuring that PLCs are the initiative teachers focus on while teaching in a pandemic, they can

the appeal of taking shortcuts that may otherwise be present if teachers feel pressed for time. By

ensuring that teachers can focus on the work of a PLC, student engagement, demonstrated by

their interest, passion, and motivation towards learning, will also benefit. Specifically, a student's

ability to learn to be by "fully developing the creative potential of each individual, in all its

richness and complexity…. a treasure lies within each one of us, and continuing education must

enable everyone to improve their self-knowledge during their vital quest for self-esteem"

(Delors, 2013, p. 323)

Finally, the overall culture of the school must change to empower PLCs within a

pandemic. "Stress and burnout that reflect a deeper malaise in the workplace where people have

lost a sense of efficacy and personal commitment to the larger purposes of the organization"

(Couture, 2003, para 21). Within the school setting, teachers and administrators must work

together to shift towards a collaborative culture "where an exchange of ideas flourish – a place

where everyone can make a difference" (Hipp & Huffman, 2007, p. 129). Creating a culture of

collaboration must be embedded into the daily work of teachers. This commitment to

collaborative culture creates an environment where all teachers are connected and values, able to

discuss their viewpoints and assumptions openly without fear of reprimand (Hipp & Huffman,

2007). Not only does this cultural shift allow for a change in teacher attitudes and habits

increasing teacher engagement, it will also support students in learning to live together. When

teachers model a collaborative culture for students, students become entrenched in the

relationship of collaboration. They learn to understand the differences among them, and the heritage that underpins these differences (Delors, 2013).

## Conclusion

PLCs within a pandemic could be a vital part of the future of education. By addressing needed changes to teacher timetables, administrative duties, and the overall school culture, a high level of engagement both teachers and students can be achieved. When teachers are engaged they experience collective ownership of the decisions, directions, and outcomes while having excitement over their own learning, while student engagement creates opportunities to participate in many experiences, both curricular and co/extracurricular, resulting in students' self-esteem and confidence growing. The engagement of both teachers and students in vibrant PLCs can contribute to the aspirations of UNESCO's Education 2050 desired future of schools *Learning to Become*.

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