New Dimensions of Professional Development of Middle School Foreign Language Teachers from the Perspective of Learning Community

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Abstract: The learning community is the vision for the high-quality development of basic education in the new era. Promoting the construction of a learning community for foreign language teachers in middle school is not only an inevitable requirement for the New English Curriculum reform, but also a realistic need to realize teachers' professional development. The learning community of foreign language teachers in middle school should be committed to creating a home for teachers to have a common sense of belonging and a field for teachers to gain professional dignity and happiness. Learning community should be built by shaping a new teaching and research culture and leading teachers to form a common vision, building a digital learning platform and expanding the space for teachers' professional development, and establishing a developmental evaluation system to promote the sustainable development of teachers.

Keywords: learning community; middle school; foreign language teachers

1. Introduction

The National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) emphasizes the need to strengthen the teaching force, with special reference to promoting the professional development of teachers. The significance and value of teachers in educational development and teaching reform are self-evident, and there are many key aspects involved in enhancing teachers' professionalism. Professional development of foreign language teachers is a dynamic process in which teachers improve their professionalism and belief systems through continuous learning and reflection in their teaching practice (Richards etal. 2002:242). [1] Beginning in the late 1980s, research on the professional development of foreign language teachers has gradually gained international attention, with studies covering second language teachers' practical knowledge, professional knowledge, teaching beliefs, critical reflection, professional development pathways and teacher behaviors, teacher learning, and teacher qualifications (Dong, Jinwei 2007).[2] Domestic research started in the late 1990s and gradually expanded from the professional quality of foreign language teachers to include teachers' knowledge competence, professional development models, teachers' cognition, teachers' decision making, teachers' beliefs, and foreign teacher education methodologies (Dong, Jinwei 2012). [3] In recent years, the professional development of foreign language teachers has attracted more and more researchers, but it has been a challenge for how to promote the professional development of foreign language teachers. The New English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) clearly states that schools should plan in a coordinated manner in terms of time, personnel, content, and form, gather the educational wisdom of the whole group of teachers, build practice-oriented learning and research communities, and make joint efforts to meet the challenges brought about by the continuous development of curriculum reform to a deeper level. Therefore, promoting the construction of teachers' learning community is not only the proper vision for the connotative development of secondary education in the new era, but also a realistic need to realize the professional development of middle school English teachers.

2. The origin and connotation of the concept of learning community

The concept of community was firstly derived from sociology. 1887, the famous German sociologist Ferdinand Vines, based on the background of the great transition from agricultural to industrial society in the modern West, first proposed the concept of community, arguing that community refers to a social group with a common sense of belonging, "a group formed through some positive relationship, unified

to internal and external. The concept of community was first proposed in the context of the great transformation, and it was believed that community refers to a social group with a common sense of belonging, "a group formed through some positive relationship, unified to play a role internally and externally, a realistic and organic combination of life" [4], and divided into blood community, geographical community and spiritual community, emphasizing the sense of belonging and identity of the participants, as well as the emotional communion and mutual care reached on the basis of mutual understanding. Many scholars such as Weber and Sachovany have further elaborated this concept since then.

The American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey introduced the concept of community into the field of education, and in his famous book Democracy and Education, he introduced the school as a form of learning community and put forward the famous propositions of "school as society" and "education as life". For Dewey, community is formed not because people are in the same place, but because they all have something in common to live together, possessing a common purpose, beliefs, expectations, and knowledge. That is, "if they all recognize a common purpose, and all care about that purpose and consider it and regulate their particular activities, then they form a community." [5] The concept of learning community is embedded in Dewey's educational thought [6], and the school is essentially a learning community, and the Dewey Experimental School is constructed according to the concept of learning community. In 1995, Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, first introduced the concept of "learning communities," which are organizations that learn together because of a common mission and vision. In 1997, Hurd of the Southwest Educational Development Research Center in the United States began to promote and implement learning communities in some schools, and on the basis of their practice, they argued that in learning communities, school teachers and administrators engage in continuous collaborative learning and sharing and apply what they have learned in action with a view to enhancing teachers' own effectiveness and thereby promoting student learning [7].

With the deepening of academic research on learning community theory and extensive exploration in the field of practice, such derivative concepts and diverse interpretations as "professional learning community," "coordinated learning community," "community of practice," and "virtual community" have emerged. Examining the connotations of these communities, although the attention and expressions vary, a consensus is that a learning community is a special organizational form in which learners are led by common goals, based on peer support and knowledge sharing, and through practical activities such as dialogue, sharing, negotiation, and reflection, with the aim of achieving meaningful learning, promoting individual development, and pursuing a common cause. In terms of its nature, a learning community is a special form of community, which has both the general characteristics of a community and its own specificity; it is not only a form of group organization or social relationship, but also an organic unity of learning philosophy, learning style and an organizational form in which people, human relationships and human activities constitute the learning environment. As far as the organizational form of teacher development is concerned, it is to establish various platforms that help teachers grow and develop professionally, with a common vision as the guide, cooperative learning as the core, sharing various learning resources, enhancing teachers' self-efficacy, and promoting their professional development together.

3. The significance of learning community for middle school foreign language teachers' professional development

The learning community, as a model of practice for teachers' professional development, is a product of the in-depth development of education reform in the world. English teachers in middle schools are an indispensable part of China's teaching force, an important implementer of the task of establishing moral education, and an educator who can train students to draw on the essence of world culture and spread Chinese culture. As a compulsory subject in basic education, the secondary school English curriculum plays a powerful role in nurturing people. In the course of globalization, internationalization and informatization, the middle school English curriculum must keep pace with the times and advance teachers' professional development through learning communities in the value goal of realizing the fundamental task of establishing moral education.

3.1 Learning communities can stimulate subjective self-consciousness in the professional development of middle school foreign language teachers

Teachers' professional development is not passive and forced, but a process in which individual teachers consciously and actively transform themselves based on their desire for professional development and pursuit of life values. In essence, it is based on self-awareness that drives the subject to consciously choose the direction and path of development, and to become a self-directed and conscious learner through self-design, implementation, and reflection. Respecting teachers' subjectivity in professional development means stimulating teachers' awareness of their own development and activating their intrinsic motivation for professional development. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) clearly states that one of the distinctive features of the English curriculum is the unity of instrumentality and humanism.[8] This requires English teachers to continuously strengthen their awareness of the core competence of the English subject, to continuously enhance their theoretical self-awareness, and to take the path of professional development. In teaching practice, middle school English teachers need to deeply understand the philosophy, goals and requirements of the curriculum, and then carry out educational and teaching research. However, the independent professional development of middle school foreign language teachers cannot be limited to "individual" development, and the learning community provides an ideal vehicle for the professional development of secondary school foreign language teachers (see Figure 1). In the learning community, teachers conduct seminars around common themes, share professional knowledge and practical experience, stimulate teachers' conscious pursuit of their own profession, awaken the desire for professional development that exists within them, and greatly mobilize the motivation, autonomy and enthusiasm of foreign language teachers' professional development, thus stimulating their sense of mission, responsibility and self-consciousness of the main body for professional development. The subjective self-awareness can not only enhance the sense of professional identity and self-efficacy of middle school foreign language teachers, but more importantly, it can strengthen their professional self-confidence, disciplinary self-confidence and professional self-confidence, consciously increase the "length" of learning, strive to expand the "width" of learning, and constantly improve the "height" of learning, so that they can develop from "experienced" teachers to "learning" and "expert" teachers. [9]
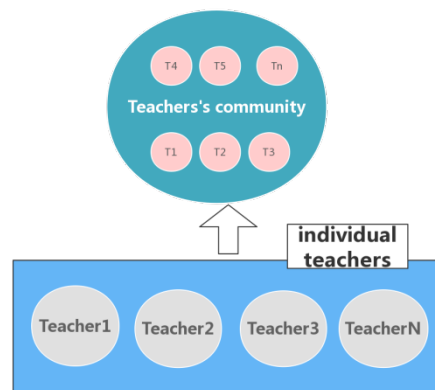

Figure 1 Individual teachers join together to form a learning community

3.2 The learning community can tap and share the resources of the teachers' group

The professional development of teachers is not only the accumulation of knowledge and the improvement of teaching skills, but also the comprehensive literacy of acquiring all advanced concepts, teaching skills and professional abilities related to education and teaching in the process of continuous learning. Learning community as a learning style can promote the sharing of knowledge experience while promoting knowledge understanding and skill acquisition, thus creating new knowledge and theories.[10]The disciplinary character of English determines the necessary value of the existence of English teachers' learning communities. To teach language is to teach culture. Language and culture are interdependent and intertwined. Culture is all-encompassing and numerous. As an individual teacher, it is difficult to be aware of such a large number of linguistic and cultural phenomena. Therefore, it is a good choice to improve information exchange and resource sharing among teachers, and to integrate the language and culture resources that each teacher possesses. At the same time, in the teaching process, the teacher's role should be changed from a knowledge and theory imparter and instructor to an organizer,

guide, helper and facilitator for students to explore knowledge and discover theories, from "how to teach" to "how to guide learning" or "how to help learning", to grasp the hot and difficult issues of students' concern and attention, and to activate students' innovative thinking and critical thinking, so that they can discuss and share their teaching experience with each other in the learning community. Because learning communities not only focus on theoretical issues identified by purely theoretical researchers, but also pay more attention to practical issues encountered and urgently needed in foreign language teaching, the construction of learning communities not only facilitates foreign language teachers' personal professional development, but also enables them to achieve common development through effective communication and with each other's strength.

3.3 Learning community helps to foster a sense of cooperation and teamwork among foreign language teachers

An optimal learning community forms a sense of teamwork, which can unite the collective wisdom of teachers and stimulate their overall potential, thus making education work with a strong vitality. Therefore, the meaning of teacher professionalism is not only limited to the development of individual expertise and teaching skills, but also requires individual professionals to improve their individual development potential through teamwork and "team focus" in order to reach success together. However, for a long time, foreign language teachers have not effectively improved the situation of "fighting alone" in the process of professional growth, and are often isolated and self-contained. The platform for communication among individual teachers is not really built up. Even with QQ, WeChat and other social networking platforms, the frequency of use is still low, and the scope of use is limited to sending and downloading relevant documents and notifications.[11] In the learning community, teachers can express their own opinions and information, share their teaching wisdom, and achieve a deeper understanding of the teaching content. It is also in this interactive cooperative learning atmosphere that the sense of cooperation and team spirit among teachers are cultivated, thus contributing to the achievement of common goals and the enhancement of professional competence, so that teachers can finally break away from the awkward situation of "isolation and helplessness" and promote their professional development.

4. The professional development path of middle school foreign language teachers from the perspective of learning community

Learning communities provide a useful way for secondary school foreign language teachers to effectively enhance their professional development, but how to use learning communities as a grip to promote the professional development of middle school foreign language teachers is described below in three points.

4.1 Shaping a new teaching and research culture, leading teachers to form a common vision

The development of every excellent community begins with a common vision. Teachers' learning community is a group organized by teachers with a common vision, and strengthening cooperation can make the community go farther. Therefore, shaping a new teaching and research culture with cooperation and sharing as the core is the value of the community. In this new culture of teaching and research, foreign language teachers form a common vision, and this vision is the goal among teachers, which leads to a sense of community. This consciousness gives them a sense of belonging in the community, and they identify with each other, so that individual teachers move from "I" to "we" and are willing to share obligations and responsibilities in the community, and form a culture unique to the professional community of teachers.[12] English class is an important place to cultivate students' core literacy and is a key course to promote students' overall and comprehensive development. Therefore, the key to how to implement the concept of moral education and develop core literacy lies in the overall improvement of teachers' literacy.[13] Teachers should constantly update their subject expertise, improve their language and cultural literacy, accumulate subject teaching knowledge, and promote sustainable professional development.

A shared vision is the premise and foundation for the formation and development of a learning community, which is both an expectation of what the teaching and research organization will achieve and a reinforcement that teachers should cultivate ideal, competent, and responsible youth. The learning community of secondary English teachers should be dedicated to creating a home where teachers have a common sense of belonging and a field where they can gain professional dignity and happiness. In this way, teachers will be motivated to transform their professional development from an external burden to

an internal need and achieve a fundamental change from "I am wanted to develop" to "I want to develop".

4.2 Building a digital learning platform and expanding the space for teachers' professional development

The building of the platform is an important aspect of the construction of the learning community. Although the learning community can provide strong resource support and a good atmosphere for teachers' professional development, the effective functioning of the learning community depends on the thrust of the platform, which is a prerequisite for ensuring the real operation and sustainable development of the community and promoting the effectiveness of the community learning. Today, we are in the Internet+ era, so the construction of a digital learning platform (see Figure 2) will provide a broad space for teachers' learning communities and promote the continuous development of teacher professionalism. Therefore, building a digital learning environment can be done in the following ways.

The first is the use of a web-based platform. The platform aims to create a dynamic learning resource library, which supports personalized retrieval and management of key information through coding and data mining of key information of learning resources, and better serves the independent and collaborative learning of secondary school English teachers, providing effective help for teachers' personal development and school-based teaching and research activities. It makes teachers willing to start a dialogue in the learning community and inject vitality and energy into the generation of the community through problem solving, which fundamentally endogenizes the ecological quality of the harmonious symbiosis of "teaching-learning-research". The second is the establishment of the WeChat public website. This platform is helpful to broaden the time and space of English teaching and research, which can reform the traditional teaching and research methods. What's more, it's better to disseminate the current mainstream concept of English teaching so that can build a platform for communication between the core layer and the radiating layer and the dispersal layer to create a micro letter public number for the professional growth community of English teaching and research groups in regional schools. Finally, QQ groups and WeChat groups are established. Based on the digital platform, QQ groups or WeChat groups are established for members within the community, in which each teacher discusses and exchanges content related to teaching, academic or practical problems. Since the communication contents are in an open and shared state, the learning community can communicate through file transfer, voice messages, and video calls, thus satisfying the self-efficacy and self-actualization needs of English class teachers, enhancing their teaching and academic abilities, and promoting the professional growth and progress of foreign language teachers.
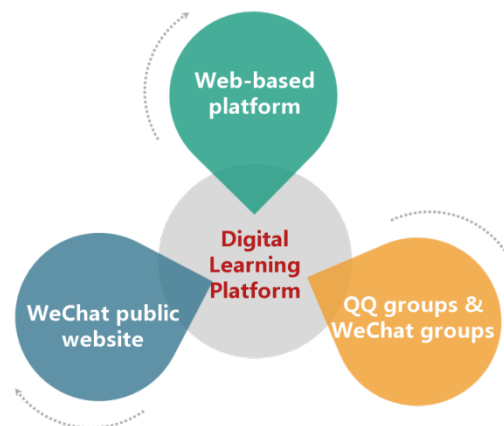

Figure 2 Structure of the digital learning platform

4.3 Establishing a developmental evaluation system to promote the sustainable development of teachers

The construction of a learning community requires support from evaluation, which in turn promotes the improvement and development of the learning community. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a developmental teacher evaluation system that aims to promote teachers' professional development. This system is a formative evaluation that is based on goals, values the process, provides timely feedback, and promotes development, and advocates a relaxed environment to promote teachers' conscious and active

development so that they can achieve their individual development goals and their own values, and is an effective strategy to promote the unification and integration of teachers' development needs with the development needs of the school.[14] Developmental teacher evaluation values teachers' self-evaluation, self-motivation, and their future development. Through the developmental evaluation system, secondary English teachers' participation is given attention, as well as providing communication channels for teachers to share in the success of all teachers, while developmental evaluation also emphasizes the use of all teachers' motivation and sense of participation and the importance of community member evaluation. (Figure 3) Due to the similarity in education and teaching objectives, methods and processes as well as educational objects and teaching environments, community members have deeper empathy and more accurate understanding of teachers' work, so community member evaluations are important learning and communication opportunities, and teachers can obtain a lot of valuable information and experiences from community member evaluations, which are very useful for improving education and teaching as well as self-development.
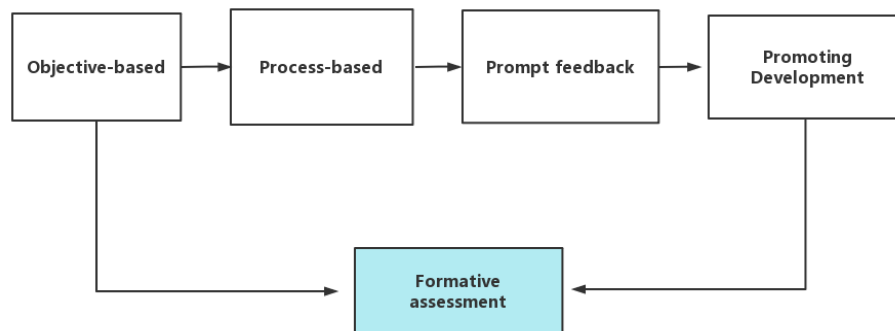

Figure 3 Content of teacher evaluation system

5. Conclusion

Teachers' professional development is an important component of the ecological development of basic education and a key guarantee for improving the quality of basic education. At present, the professional development of secondary school foreign language teachers is facing a great crisis and test, and the construction of a professional learning community for foreign language teachers can help solve various problems in the professional growth of secondary school foreign language teachers. Therefore, this paper provides a path for secondary school foreign language teachers to explore in the perspective of learning communities in order to help secondary school teaching to promote their own continuous and sustainable development on the basis of helping students' growth. At the same time, this study spent a lot of time exploring the meaning and paths of establishing learning communities for secondary school English teachers, and future research can make a corresponding contribution to basic education through empirical studies to assist in testing the effectiveness of learning communities.

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