

Developing Transformative Leadership for Building Professional Learning Communities in China

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ABSTRACT. *Though China's educational system has gone through a number of reforms, the concept and practice of PLCs have not been paid enough attention. Therefore, teachers still regard educational reform as a mandated change, which gives rise to many problems, such as negative emotions, superficial implementation, and contrived collegiality. This article will present the importance of founding a successful PLC in educational change with the help of leadership theory. By comparing transformative leadership with transactional, transformational leadership, this paper will demonstrate what differences transformative leadership can make in changing teacher identity, emotion and professionalism as well as in preparing teachers for social justice.*

Keywords: *Transformative Leadership, Professional Learning Communities, Educational Reform, Social Justice*

1. Introduction

In recent years, though China's educational system has gone through a number of reforms, a radical educational breakthrough has not yet occurred. According to Michael Fullan (2006), to break the "ceiling effect" in education, a school has to "have its internal act together" (p. 8). That is to say, building a collaborative educational community may help schools gain the capacity to improve and make great breakthroughs. However, as the main implementers of all educational changes and reforms, front-line teachers did not play the role of change agents during China's recent reforms. In addition, their unpleasant attitudes and emotions as well

as their tendency to continue old behaviors and teaching methods hindered their influence as internal actors. Nevertheless, researchers have proved that establishing a teachers' professional learning community (PLC) seems to be one possible solution to provide teachers enough support and to transform them into change agents under the context of curriculum reform. Yet leadership strategies for building a PLC are rarely discussed by scholars. Therefore, in this paper, I will elaborate on how to apply leadership theories, particularly transformative leadership theory, in creating PLC in China.

Since 2001, the new national curriculum reform has been initiated, teacher in-service training in China has received increasing emphasis; districts and schools have adopted various teacher development programs to help teachers adjust to this new change (Lia, 2011). As the embryonic form of PLCs, those programs try to transform teacher professionalism and identity, yet teachers still regard this reform as a mandated change, which gives rise to many problems, such as negative emotions, superficial implementation, and "contrived collegiality" (Lai, 2011, p. 613). I believe solving these problems calls for establishing real PLCs with the help of transformative leadership strategies. Two factors contribute to my position. For one thing, transformative leadership theory suggests that change should start with the individuals in schools; to be specific, if leaders can change teachers' personal teaching philosophies, and build a shared vision among faculty in schools, teachers will implement reforms voluntarily (Kose, 2011). For another, transformative pedagogy and the new curriculum reform share the same goal: social justice (Shields, 2010).

To begin this paper, I will present a comprehensive literature review on PLC and transformative leadership. The main argument will include three parts. First, by comparing transformative leadership with two other leadership strategies -- namely transactional, transformational -- I will explain why I think transformative leadership can assist schools in building successful PLCs. Second, I will demonstrate what differences transformative leadership can make in changing teacher identity, emotion and professionalism as well as in preparing teachers for social justice. Last, I will predict the challenges and obstacles in applying transformative leadership in PLCs in China's current context.

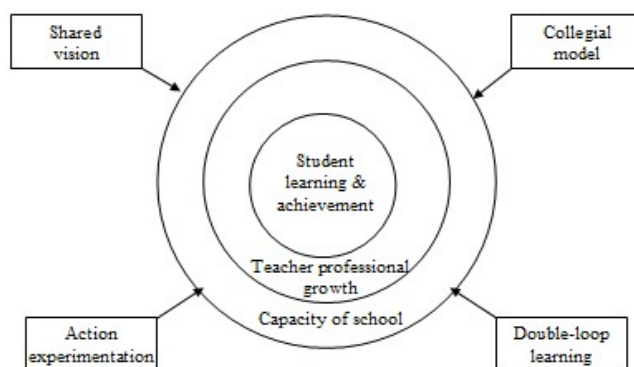
2. Literature Review on the Potential of PLC in China

The concept of a PLC was put forward by Hord (1997). He writes that team members in PLC need to “regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learners’ needs through a shared curricular-focused vision” (p. 165). After Hord, more educators tried to explore and deepen the understanding of PLC. Carol Mullen (2009) simply interprets the meaning of PLC as the integration of two concepts: professional learning and community, whereas Lia (2010) provides a more detailed definition: “Teachers joint efforts to generate new knowledge of practice and their mutual support of each other’s professional growth” (p. 616). Both expressions believe that learning and sharing are the soul of teacher professional development. However, Laura Servage (2008) argues that “the PLC is more than group work” (p. 64), because schools are endowed with new missions in this new era, which include practicing democratic ideals and realizing social justice.

Wong (2010) synthesizes the elements in PLC, and divides its major characteristics into six dimensions: shared goals and values, shared individual practice, collective learning, collaborative culture, action experimentation, and double-loop learning; but, the shared individual practice, collective learning, and collaborative culture could be combined into one dimension: the collegial model (Bush, 2011). Therefore, I will elaborate on the beliefs and characteristics of PLC according to the following four aspects: building a shared vision, a collegial model, transforming theory into action, and critical and creative reflection.

First and foremost, to create a PLC, the school vision should be commonly shared among teachers and students as well as surrounding community members. Carol Mullen (2009) regards shared vision as the need for universal design in schools, so that all faculties will no longer consider the school as “their school” but “our school”. However, Senge (1999) believes that “shared visions emerge from personal visions; this is how they derive their energy and how they foster commitment” (p.197). That is to say, schools should gather individuals’ personal visions first, and then build a group vision, which can represent individual visions. Second, apart from a shared vision, collaborative learning is also critical in building a PLC. Typically, PLCs in schools ask for regular gatherings of all staff, to encourage them to be involved and engage in “collaborative planning, curriculum study and learning assessment” (Servage, 2008, p. 64). Moreover, Servage (2008)

holds the opinion that “PLC is more than group work” (p. 64). Effective collaboration needs mutual trust, so that teachers will perceive their tasks as a collective practice rather than individual work, and get professional and emotional supports from their peers (Wong, 2010). Consequently, an environment that encourages risk taking will be established. Third, “action experimentation” is another distinctive characteristic of PLC (Wong, 2010, p. 625). PLCs not only request teachers’ continuous learning, but also call for their acting on what they have learned. Moreover, an effective PLC will provide “resources and materials to help the teachers understand the theoretical basis for learning communities” (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010, p.1), and encourage them to practice their personal teaching philosophy and pedagogy. With trial-and-error approaches, teachers are offered a free environment to solve problems and issues in authentic contexts of daily teaching practices. Last, double-loop learning is invaluable to sustain professional learning, because it is the critical thinking and reflection which distinguishes a PLC from the concept of a learning community. The idea of double-loop learning was created by Chris Argyris (1982), that involves detect and correct error and question the assumptions and operating norms. However, Brandt (2003) contends that besides detecting and correcting errors, double-loop learning leads to the generation of new knowledge and norms, which will direct future action.



However, as the diagram above indicates, these four characteristics only provide a solid foundation for establishing a successful PLC; yet students’ learning and intellectual growth remains the primary goal (Mullen, 2009). Teachers’

professional growth may be the most obvious and direct result of PLC, but students and schools can also benefit from it. Research on PLCs in China shows that student academic achievement has improved and that most students can adapt to the new curriculum reform well, with teachers' guidance (Wong, 2010). With change by students and teachers, the culture of schools will also change gradually. For example, shared decision making contributes to a democratic atmosphere in schools leading the organizational form of schools into a learning organization (Brandt, 2003).

3. Overview on Transformative Leadership

There are two beliefs about the concept of transformative leadership. For some scholars "transformative leadership is a mere derivative of transformational leadership" (as cited in Langlois, 2011, p. 92), thus they seem to equate transformative leadership with transformational leadership or generally use the term "transforming" (Langlois, 2011, p. 92) to represent both concepts. For other educators, transformative leadership is distinct from transformational leadership. According to Shields (2010):

Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. (p. 559)

He also distinguishes transformative leadership from transactional and transformational leadership in other aspects, such as key values, goal, and processes. Kose (2011) and Langlois (2011) back up Shields's (2010) ideas by saying that it is the recognition of inequity and the awareness of education for all students that differentiates transformative leadership from other leadership theories.

As for the characteristics of transformative leadership, I will elaborate on two main features: transformation and "schools as places of democracy" (Jun, 2011, p. 240). For one thing, the goals of transformative leadership are individual change and organizational reform (Shields, 2010). The reason why individual change comes before the organizational reform is because the former is at the core of educational change. Shields (2010) believes that as individuals change the culture and the structure of the organization will change accordingly. Moreover, transformative leadership is also a method leading toward individual freedom and empowerment

and to enjoy the power to conduct dialogue and research on issues such as educational inequity and deficit thinking (Jun, 2011). Transformative leaders also highlight the notion of democracy. Education for social justice is not only about guaranteeing access to school, but also is about improving the academic, social, and civic outcomes in schools (Shields, 2010). That is to say, transformative leaders should pay attention to how to engage every student in curriculum, especially the disadvantaged and marginalized groups. To build a democratic school, where every stakeholder can feel comfortable and safe enough to participate in meaningful dialogue and informed decision making, empowerment through transformative pedagogy is needed. Therefore, establishing professional learning communities can serve as a starting point to implement transformative leadership.

4. Advantages of Transformative Leadership in Building PLCs

Cheng and Ko (2012) claim that learning-focused leadership and shared leadership will benefit PLCs in China, but they fail to come up with a particular leadership paradigm. Therefore, I will explain why I think transformative leadership can assist schools in building successful PLCs, by comparing it with two other popular leadership strategies: transactional, transformational.

Compared with transactional leadership, transformative leadership can give teachers in PLCs more freedom to conduct meaningful and open dialogue on educational issues in reforms, so that staff will feel their voices are important for their democratic schools. However, transactional leadership will lead to “bureaucratic management” and “hierarchical organizational structures” (Cheng & Ko, 2012, p. 165). The power issue also has a direct link to personnel relationship in schools; transformative leadership helps with building trust and interdependence between members in PLCs, so that teachers can get professional and emotional support from this safe haven, while transactional leadership will contribute to the competition between teachers and even result in “contrived collegiality” (Lai, 2011, p. 613). In addition, although transactional leadership could change what people do effectively, this change can only be a “first-order change”, instead of a “second-order change” (Fullan, 2001, p. 5). That is to say, unlike transactional leadership, transformative leadership can change teachers’ beliefs and perceptions, which can change the structures and culture of schools naturally. Moreover, as to the

sustainability of reforms, transactional leadership can only result in teachers' compliance and compromise, but transformative leadership can make teachers in PLCs make a commitment to the shared mission of their school.

Transformational leadership and transformative leadership agree that transforming is the goal of change. However, transformational leaders contend that organizational development is the aim and end of educational change, in other words, transformational leadership believes that if the organizational model has been changed, the members in this organization will be changed (Shields, 2010). On the contrary, transformative leaders realize that the change of agents is more crucial. If organizational change comes first, teachers may view reform as a compulsory change; the "incongruence" between their former experience and the value of new reforms will give rise to teachers' negative reactions. Therefore, transforming teacher professionalism and identity in PLCs will prepare every member in PLCs to be ready for change.

Consequently, I think transformative leadership can help educational leaders to build effective PLCs in the new context in China. I will illustrate my opinion on the impact of transformative leadership on improving PLCs in China in the following two dimensions: changing teachers' identity and professionalism, and preparing teachers for social justice.

5. Changing Teachers' Identity and Professionalism

The magical factor about PLCs lies in its ability to reshape teachers' identity and professionalism. Both teacher development and transformative leadership aim to change the teachers' habits of mind about teaching; and this transformation not only depends on social context, especially educational reform, but also relies on teachers' changing roles and pedagogies (Cranton & King, 2003). From my perspective, transformative leadership can support the agents of change according to the following three aspects.

First and foremost, transformative leadership can help schools to build a transformative vision, and make sure all school stakeholders, including teachers, are on board (Kose, 2011). Lee and Yin (2011) have attested that if teachers' teaching experience and "professional orientations" are in line with "mandated reform

agendas” (p. 26), their job satisfaction, commitment as well as their morale towards the reform will be improved. And transformative leaders are able to develop a shared vision, which can “integrate school efforts under a broad umbrella” (Kose, 2011, p. 124). Through sharing of different perspectives, a comprehensive shared vision can be developed; more importantly, those traditionally marginalized voices, such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, minority students, and left-behind students, can be heard by school administrators and teachers, so that they can pay extra attention to their special needs. In addition, after a shared vision has been developed, transformative leaders need to facilitate all stakeholders, especially the members of PLCs, to understand this shared vision.

Second, besides the integration of individual and collective beliefs, teacher identity and professionalism is also restructured through engagement in reflection and interaction with others. The dialogue and reflection that is emphasized by transformative leadership offer teachers both theoretical and emotional support (Mohan, 2011), thus PLCs will become safe havens for teachers stepping outside their comfort zone and taking risks.

A fundamental task of the educational leader is to ask questions (Shields, 2010). Questions like “What happened here?” or “How will my decision affect me and others?” will arouse teachers’ motivation to reflect on educational issues. Cranton and King (2003) believe that there are three themes that teachers in PLCs need to reflect on and have dialogue about: content, process and the question itself. That is to say, teachers have to examine their action and thinking, which has been taken for granted, to consider whether their problem-solving strategies have gone wrong.

However, self-reflection alone cannot guarantee the transformation of teachers; collaboration and group thinking can also contribute to teachers’ awareness of responsibility and accountability. For example, by sharing learning resources and creating a shared language about their practice, community members can deepen their innovative ideas during interactions. Moreover, emotional and professional supports will encourage them to make a commitment to “a high quality of intellectual work for their students” (Wong, 2010, p. 625). Therefore, only by combining self-reflection and peer-dialogue, will teachers become open-minded enough to accept new ideas and views and be willing to embrace challenges and risk.

Third, the idea of “schools as places of democracy” is regarded as a key characteristic of transformative leadership (Jun, 2011, p. 240), which makes the empowerment of teachers in PLCs possible. Studies show that teacher empowerment has positive correlations with reform implementations and reform outcomes,

To change the long-existing top-down management style, transformative leadership, as democratic leadership, will make teachers in school feel trusted and allow them to enjoy the freedom to express their ideas and beliefs. I believe that by giving teachers more power to construct their own curriculum and teaching method, they will have the courage to put their learning into action. For example, if teachers can be encouraged to adopt the student-centered approach by exploring new teaching methods with the help of PLCs, rather than following the example in open classes, teachers will feel they are responsible for their own learning and teaching, and have stronger motivation to self-develop. Furthermore, the empowerment of teachers can support organizational development, because democratic schools enable teachers to practice double-loop learning, which will use individual strengths to generate innovative and creative ideas for changing the culture and structure of the school. In a word, the concept of democracy in transformative leadership is beneficial to both profound personal change, and institutional change.

6. Preparing Teachers for Social Justice

Scholars, such as Theoharis (2007) refer to transformative leadership as “leadership for social justice”, and define it as a leadership that aims at solving “issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions” (as cited in Shields, 2010, p. 572). I will deliver my opinion in two aspects: transformative belief and transformative action.

For one thing, transformative leadership will assist teachers to realize the issue of power and privilege and pay more attention to marginalized groups. Even through educational inequity for different regions and social injustice for disadvantaged students are popular topics in mass media, unlike in western countries, teachers as well as school administrators in China seldom mention the discourse of social justice. However, this persistent silence cannot be “ignored, tolerated, or perpetuated by

transformative leaders” (Mohan, 2011, p. 54). To break the silence in school, teachers have to share the transformative belief.

In my view, this process should start from a realization of the importance of social justice in schools. As Shields (2010) suggests, transformative leaders can engage teachers in moral dialogue that will overcome “pathologies of silences” (p. 109), and challenges their existing beliefs and practices. For example, transformative leadership asks for discussion among members in PLCs about student diversity and deficit thinking, which means blaming the backgrounds of students or their parents for their academic failures. Moreover, in changing contexts, teachers begin to adopt student-centered teaching approaches; an inclusive classroom, where all students’ needs are considered, should be built by transformative teachers. In addition, transformative leadership can help teachers realize their accountability to society by believing their practice can impact students’ sense of democracy and can contribute to the construction of inclusive and equitable schools as well as societies. Thus, teachers’ acknowledgement of power and privilege, and the struggle for liberation, democracy, equity and justice can profoundly change students, schools and society.

In transforming teachers’ beliefs and behaviors, transformative leadership also helps with solving the problems of educational inequality and inequity and narrowing the student achievement gap. Moreover, teachers’ courage will be required to transform these critical ideas into authentic practice, and transformative leaders need to build a comprehensive system to support teachers’ efforts for social justice.

Since schools are encouraged to develop school-based curriculum, To design a multicultural curriculum, teachers need to intentionally care about different students’ needs, rather than developing the curriculum simply for standardized tests. Moreover, with the multicultural curriculum, students will feel personally connected with learning materials, so that students’ engagement in classrooms will be increased; in the long run, student academic achievement will also be improved. In addition, collaboration and dialogue in PLCs will also facilitate teachers to create their curriculum. For example, if a teacher is having difficulty in teaching a student with special needs, he/she can turn to the experts in PLC and even participate in a double-loop learning process, to create new solutions for helping disadvantaged

students.

Second, transformative teachers will also make more connections with traditionally marginalized students and their parents through PLCs, therefore more stakeholders will be involved in a democratic school. By various methods, such as face to face communication, email, and newsletters, teachers can show their care for social justice and educational equality and equity; more importantly teachers need to encourage students and parents to share their stories and to voice their needs. From my point of view, the impact of learning in PLCs should not be limited to schools; the advantaged belief and learning should benefit all members in community.

7. Challenges and Issues

Though the idea of applying transformative leadership in PLCs is appealing and promising, there are three main challenges and obstacles.

Firstly, a highly bureaucratic educational system may hinder the practicing of transformative leadership in PLCs (Tryiankowski, 2011). Most schools in China, teachers do not have the opportunity to choose their own pedagogy or create their own curriculum. In addition, the top-down management of the educational system relies too much on educational law and instruction. This leads to transaction leadership and provides no political support for change of leadership. What's worse, in a bureaucratic context, the high-stakes assessment for students as well as teachers leaves no room for personal reflection and critical thinking on the injustices in schools.

Second, applying transformative learning is a long process, which may go through three leadership stages – emerging leadership, developing leadership, and accomplished leadership. In the first stage, transformative leadership focuses on changing individuals' faiths and values; Stephenson thinks this will take one year, however, owing to the large population and regional diversity in China, this process may take longer. Furthermore, without economic and theoretical support, teachers' unwillingness to involve and engage will also be a serious problem. As to the second and third stages, which focus on the change of groups and communities, more conflicts of values have to be overcome, and may even require a large-scale social reform.

Third, to meet every student's needs, the PLCs need to also include students and parents, which may affect teacher workload. Both PLCs and transformative leadership demand teachers to spend more time to understand and meet various needs of students. However, with the pressure of standardized tests, teachers often find it is hard to balance their accountability to schools and society as well as to students. Moreover, professional learning on pedagogy and social justice also takes time and energy. Consequently, teachers may give up on some less relevant tasks, such as self-development and reflection, and only worry about elements that will affect their assessment.

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