

Revamping Teacher Community

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Abstract:

The school community is made up of different components, including students, teachers, administration, and the community as a whole. In recent times, the teacher community has been impacted by various things such as a lack of support from administrations and the community, the COVID-19 pandemic, education legislation, and more. This lack of teacher community is impacting the number of teachers who choose to stay in the profession and the quality of education that students receive. With this article, I hope to bring more awareness to the importance of teacher community, the ways that it can be improved, and its implications in the field.

Keywords: communities of practice, dialogue, teaching profession.

Introduction

I've been a part of different roles within the school system over the course of my educational career. Student, classmate, teacher, and colleague are some of the hats that I have worn over the years. These roles have helped shaped my viewpoints related to education as well as personal views that helped me become who I am today.

When it comes to school community, I experienced community the most as a student. My teachers created not only a space for learning but also opportunities for us students to grow as people. My peers created community through collaborating on group projects, reviewing concepts that we struggled with, and leaning on each other as support when we were stressed. In my student teaching cohort, an online group page was created for us to check in with each other on how our first year of teaching was going and ask each other for advice on how to navigate new situations we might be encountering early in our teaching careers.

Transitioning into my teaching career, it has been more challenging to find and maintain a teacher community. As a brand new teacher, it did take some time for me to find people to connect with

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as I was figuring out who I was and what kind of teacher I wanted to be. Within my department at my school, there has been some turnover due either to retirement or new teaching opportunities elsewhere. However, my department has been consistent in terms of the people present, what our goals are as a department, and what we stand for. This was my first introduction to what a strong teacher community could look like.

Outside of that context, however, it has been more challenging to find a teacher community on a school-wide scale or even a larger community scale. At school, for example, we conducted a series of personality tests to learn about ourselves, our leadership styles, and how those personality traits influence who we are as teachers. We spent the day learning about the different personality tests and how we can collaborate in the future. While it was helpful to learn more about our colleagues, it was something we did once and never addressed again. At a state level, the Oklahoma teacher walkout in 2018 brought teachers and education advocates from all over the state together for a common cause. In those two weeks, teachers worked together side-by-side, connecting with legislators and advocates in different capacities. A strong community was formed in fighting for the same cause: more funding for our students. However, as the walkout ended, that sense of community faded as people went back to their respective schools and lives.

As a now veteran teacher, I see the lack of teacher community at various levels of education. Within the first five years of their teaching careers, 44% of teachers leave the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2018). In recent memory, education has been facing more challenges with the wave of legislation being passed on what and how teachers teach various subjects in the classroom, as well as challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought in education since 2020. With all of these factors in place, without a strong teacher community, the profession will continue to struggle. In this piece, I will be arguing for a renewed emphasis on teacher community, the things impacting teacher community, and the implications that a strong teacher community will have on the profession and education as a whole.

Attempts at Teacher Community

When it comes to community in education, there have been attempts and research conducted on how to create a classroom community with students. Lev Vygotsky's theory on learning emphasizes the importance of social interaction and community. The interaction between peers is important as it helps students create meaning within their learning (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). John Dewey discussed the importance of creating a safe classroom space for all students so that they feel comfortable sharing their various life experiences and foster a community of

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learning (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). There is also various research conducted on how to create class community in various educational spaces, such as in virtual classrooms, pre-K to 12th grade classrooms, classrooms in different subject settings, and more.

When it comes to specifically creating a teacher community, Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice can provide some insight into how to create a community space. Communities of practice are defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In order for a community of practice to occur, there must be three aspects in place. The first aspect is a domain or a shared interest. It is important to note that being a part of a community of practice is considered the same as a membership or another serious commitment (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The second aspect is that there must be a community. The people within a community of practice need to regularly and consistently interact with each other and building relationships (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through these relationships, the people are able to share, collaborate, and build up their group. The last aspect is that there must be practice. Being part of a group is not enough—it must be an active process. With members of the group working on their practice, the people in the group reflect on what is going well and what needs improvement (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The members of the group also create and share resources with each other. The goal for practice is that eventually, the members of the group become practitioners in order to pass their work on to others.

Impacts on Teacher Community

While there have been teacher communities from the beginning, there has been more of an emphasis on creating communities of practice for teachers within education over the past few decades. For example, Deborah Meier (1998) pushed for a small schools initiative in order for teachers to have more of a direction in what they were teaching in order to help students become more successful in the classroom. In addition, there has been a push to create more professional learning opportunities for teachers to come together to learn new techniques and strategies, and teacher education programs have been working on creating a space for pre-service teachers to build their own communities (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012; Lieberman, 1988). In 2021, the United States Department of Education created two communities of practice: *Evidence-Based Interventions: Using American Rescue Plan Resources to Accelerate Learning Community of Practice*, and *Toward an Equitable Education and Recovery: Transforming Kindergarten Community of Practice*. The goal of these communities of practice is to help combat issues created as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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One example of a type of community of practice seen within daily teaching is Professional Learning Communities. PLCs are designed to have teachers work together collaboratively using research and inquiry to help students become successful in their learning goals (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Although the original purpose of PLCs was about teachers working together in community, it has turned into a space where it is expected to focus more on data, prioritizing test scores and which standards we must cover in order for students to be successful for their tests, as opposed to developing and working on teacher practice. The lack of support for teachers to navigate these spaces, the lack of funding, and the task of creating time for teachers to meet add to the challenge of creating effective PLCs.

Another factor playing a role in the lack of teacher community is the anti-dialogue rhetoric currently plaguing education. According to Paulo Friere (1970), dialogue is people in conversation while they practice collective reflection and action. This means that people are engaging in meaningful conversation, trying to address problems within a community, and trying to work together to find solutions. There is also a balance of power within dialogue, meaning that both sides are able to equally contribute to speaking out on issues and finding solutions.

What we are experiencing in education is the use of anti-dialogue. Anti-dialogue is different than dialogue due to the power imbalance between the two groups and the need to assert control over the other group (Friere, 1970). We have seen recent examples of this within education legislation over the past few decades, from No Child Left Behind and earlier. Legislation has been created at national and state levels without consideration for teachers or others who have worked in the education field. This has led to harmful educational policies that are changing and/or limiting what is being taught in classrooms. The most recent examples of this include the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida, banning the teaching of Critical Race Theory in different states across the country, the attempt to ban certain books in schools, and more.

These laws are not designed to protect students. Rather, these policies are being created in order to keep teachers in line and prevent them from teaching topics that are deemed “uncomfortable” for students. On top of this, heavy workloads along with unrealistic expectations and demands have caused more teachers to feel like they have no choice but to leave the profession to maintain their own well-being (Berger, 2022). Years of teachers feeling mistreated and burned out add to these policies to create a situation in which record numbers of teachers are leaving the profession. If these trends continue, the teaching profession will drastically change as more experienced professionals exit. This will impact the quality of education children at all levels will receive for years to come.

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How to Foster Teacher Community

In order to address teacher community, school districts need to re-emphasize the use of communities of practice. This needs to be a strong effort made by teachers and districts as well as state personnel in order to allow for communities of practice to flourish. By creating consistent and meaningful collaboration time with teachers, we will see more teachers working together and thinking about their practice in a more critical and reflective way, and, ultimately, new ways of teaching will come out of these communities. There must be more for teachers than a Professional Development seminar each semester. There has to be a space for teachers to meet regularly and consistently in order for communities of practice to work and for teachers to feel like they have a community in their respective schools and districts.

In addition, there needs to be a shift from the anti-dialogue impacting education today. Community members, district administrators, educational policymakers, and teachers need to come together to create a more balanced power relationship with legislators. Educational policy impacts everyone who is involved in education in one way or another, especially students. By having more active advocates for education, teachers will feel like they have more support from the communities that they are teaching in and create a more balanced dialogue with legislators creating policy. It cannot only be on teachers to fix the dialogue, it must be a community effort. This will take time and patience, but it is a strong start in changing the narrative and power dynamics causing teachers to leave the profession.

The implications of changes to how we see and practice teacher community will have positive benefits for education in the future. For teachers, having strong communities of practice and dialogue with legislators will allow them to have power in their profession, help them create stronger teaching strategies and practices, and, ultimately, help keep teachers in the profession. This in turn will help improve student learning and school community as a whole, as the teachers feel motivated and constantly engage in ways to help improve students' experience. At my school, there was a phrase we were told constantly during the last two years regarding student achievement and meeting them where they are at: "Grace over grades." It is time that we as a society take that philosophy and apply that to our teaching profession.

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