

Understanding ways to establish and sustain school-based professional learning community of teachers in the context of assessment reform

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Abstract:

This study explores ways in which a school-based professional learning community of teachers can be established for implementing an assessment reform ‘Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation’ in the school context. Specific schemes are delineated through workings in a school, using a case study approach. It is reported that merely establishing professional learning communities is not enough, rather a constant focus on sustaining the momentum set off is necessary, hence, particular approaches for the same have been identified. It is envisaged that proactive leadership, which is open to innovations and amenable to change, can foster avenues for continuous professional development of teachers to bring about a change in the classroom practices.

Keywords: *Professional learning community, Formative Assessment, Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation, Assessment reform*

Introduction

Change in the schooling systems, in order to improve students’ learning and their outcomes, is a common feature across the world (Bansal, 2017). Priestley (2005) notes that any change is unlikely to be successful unless there exists a strong sense of collaboration among the staff members (teachers as well as administrators), committed to the vision of change for betterment of students’ learning. In line with this view, this article examines the means of establishing a School-based Professional Learning Community (SBPLC, henceforth) for implementing an assessment reform ‘Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation’ in school settings. Along with this, specific ways to sustain SBPLC are identified through the workings of a school involved in the process of assimilation of the reform process.

School based professional learning community

School based professional learning community is described as a collaborative professional learning community of all the professionals working in a school for improving students’ learning (DuFour & Eaker, 2002). In a SBPLC, teachers and administrators of the school “work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p.4).

Inquiry inherent to the PLC involves the following phases- (i) planning: setting goals, actions, strategies (ii) evidence collection; (iii) interpretation: interpreting the gap between achieved and intended outcomes; (iv) utilisation: implementing interventions to close the gap; (v) evaluation: assessing the effectiveness of the intervention (Birenbaum, Kimron, Shilton & Shahaf-Barzilay, 2009).

Hord (2004) delineated the essential characteristics of a PLC, which entail: (i) shared values and mission which provide an

“undeveloping focus” (Hord, 2004) on goals to be pursued and aid in “ethical decision making” (Louis, Kruse & Bryk, 1995); (ii) members sharing a collective responsibility for students’ learning by promoting “reflective dialogue” (Louis et al., 1995) on educational issues, encouraging all to be fair to their teaching practices; (iii) provision of constant avenues of engagement in reflective professional inquiry on educational issues leading to “deprivatisation of practice” (Louis et al., 1995) by frequent examination of teachers’ classroom practices, seeking new knowledge (Hord, 2004), platforms for tacit knowledge constantly being converted into shared knowledge through interaction (Fullan, 1993); and applying new ideas and information to problem solving; (iv) by encouraging collaboration that goes beyond the superficial exchanges of help, support, or assistance (Louis et al., 1995), and involves feelings of interdependence for a shared purpose.

This article, while drawing from a case study of an Indian senior secondary school, describes how changes in school assessment policy, which included introduction of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation, were successfully incorporated by establishing and sustaining school-based professional learning communities of teachers. Viewing the data through the theoretical lens described above, I intend to unpick the nuances entailed in establishment, regulation, and sustaining professional learning communities.

The national context

Schools in the Indian educational system have adopted a traditional, high-stake perspective towards educational assessment, largely borrowed from its British colonisers (Nawani, 2015), that “regards “sameness of treatment” and “remoteness of the examiner from the learner assessed” as being central to successful evaluation of learning” (p.38). In common parlance, they are called board examinations. National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) and Position Paper on Examination

Reform (NCERT, 2006) recommended changes in examination structure and introduction of varied modes of pupil assessment, enhanced reporting of performance, and variability in time of taking assessment to suit learners’ needs, styles and paces of learning.

Consequently, Central Board of Secondary Education introduced Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation scheme (CCE, henceforth) as an examination reform, with effect from October 2009 in class IX, in all its affiliated schools (CBSE, 2014). Through CCE scheme, formative assessment was emphasised and the details are delineated in the next section.

Formative Assessment: Major plank of CCE

William and Thompson (2007) have identified three processes of teaching and learning involved in classrooms practising formative assessment:

- Establishing where the learners are in their learning;
- Establishing where they are going; and,
- Establishing what needs to be done to get them there.

They conceptualised the following as five key strategies of formative assessment: (i) Clarifying the learning intentions and criteria of success, (ii) engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding, (iii) providing feedback that moves learner forward, (iv) activating students as instructional resources for one another, (v) and, activating students as the owners of their own learning. Brookhart (2014) added student goal setting to the list of William and Thompson’s strategies.

The ways in which schools worked towards assimilation of change within their contexts is studied here, using a case study of a school as described in the following section.

Methodology

Case study seemed to be the appropriate tool as it enables the researcher to “describe actions within a social setting and invites, rather than tries, to control the possibility of a rich array of variables” (Holliday, 2007, p.4). Data was collected using non-participant observation of the school and classroom practices; parent-teacher meetings, and SBPLC meetings in the year 2011-12. It was coupled by semi-structured interviewing of school personnel (Principal, Heads, Secondary grade teachers), two focused group discussions with students; and document analysis of assessment tasks, school academic planners, and teacher diaries.

The School

Greenjingle school is a large senior secondary school, with over 1100 students and 50 teaching staff. The school building is located in the high-end suburbs of the New-Delhi city. Students usually belonged to upper class high-income urban society. The school had high quality sports, music and many other co-curricular activities. School’s mission statement “every child can be a winner” pointed towards a firm belief held by the school personnel in a child’s potentialities to excel in all walks of life.

Hierarchically, the school was headed by the Principal- Mrs. Meena, who was then subordinated by two supervisory heads – academic and cultural—for the entire school. The initiative to reconsider the ways in which teachers assess children’s work, subsequent to introduction of CCE, was taken by the management and teachers collaboratively. External reform developed in a dialectical fashion, a dynamic two-way relationship between the initiative and the context of enactment. Students’ opinion vis-a vis the initiative was recurrently catered to and discussed in the meetings. Parents’ take on reform initiative was constantly sought, through frequent parent- teacher meetings. Further details on how SBPLC was established and used for the

incorporation of CCE are delineated in the upcoming sections.

Establishing SBPLC

The observational data collected from the school provided an evidence of successful assimilation of CCE reform. It was reported by school leadership that established SBPLC to incorporate assessment reform into their context. Below, I delineate some of the notable ways in which SBPLC was established by the school.

Proactive Leadership and trust building

School Principal, Mrs. Meena, reported that many of the formative assessment strategies had already been in use in the school although they were not being explicitly practised under the aegis of formative assessment. Such practices provided a social context for ready acceptance of the reform initiative among the teachers. The school’s Principal observed:

CCE is not new for us, we have already been assessing students continuously and comprehensively since ages but yes now we have got an official sanction for our practices... certainly few changes are there, such as, nature of reporting to parents etc.(Meena, Greenjingle school, 2011).

She observed that, in order to bring change, it was essential to improve the levels of dialogue, discussion and feedback essential to the reform initiative. She situated professional learning community at various levels –grade level, subject level and others, to encourage constant pondering over academic issues. She made a genuine effort to attend most of the meetings, remained open to innovation, was receptive to ideas and amenable to change. The Principal’s attitude was responsible for fostering a cultural shift in school practice, wherein all practitioners are focused on the achievement of reform.

Structural Changes and Focus on Classroom Practice

The school worked towards reform initiative by focusing directly on classroom practices. They

incorporated a few structural and ideological changes in their practices to make the reform initiative a success, such as:

- Reducing emphasis on written tests and encouraging oral and informal classroom-based feedback;
- Introducing variety of assessment tasks and tools to suit learners' needs, styles and paces; and
- Increasing interactions with parents to encourage reflective dialogue and make them partners in the change process.

In general terms, the school worked towards making the aims and criteria of assessment reform initiative explicit to one and all involved in the process.

Professional Development

Though the school was committed to the reform process, yet it had not been possible without constant support provided through professional development avenues. Principal Meena constituted a structured plan for professional development of her teachers. Subject-based experts, resource persons and other online opportunities were introduced for teachers to gain an exposure of cutting-edge tools and technologies. Following this, they were made to present it at various platforms and show evidence of how the innovations were being used to change the classroom practices, with respect to the reform initiative.

The efforts of establishing SBPLC were simultaneously coupled with provisions for their sustainment, which are discussed in the next section.

Sustaining professional learning communities

Upon establishing school-based PLCs, another challenge in front of the administration was to sustain the momentum for collaboration in SBPLCs. This was achieved in a number of ways.

First, *structural changes* made by the school administration were supportive in decreasing the workload of students as well as the teachers and increased their learning. This was achieved through collaborative planning done by the teachers at the beginning of the session. SBPLC meetings were supported by various subject-based experts in which ways to innovate and simultaneously reduce workload were charted collaboratively. While elucidating the nature of planning entailed, a teacher noted:

“We design assessment tasks in such a way that students were involved in differing assessment contexts in different subjects at a particular point of time. For instance, in the month of April, physics teacher would do a pair and share activity, biology teacher would call a resource person and chemistry teacher would do concept mapping with children of the same class. In this way, there would be no repetition and students would learn to demonstrate their understanding by multiple modes at the same time”. (Science Teacher, Greenjingle School, 2012)

Along with this, the school had a “no written homework” policy. Pedagogical planning entailed spaces for students to complete their assignments and other forms of academic work within the classrooms. Moreover, they were given time to explore the library, make projects and models and prepare for quizzes etc. within their school timings. In this way, students were engaged in productive academic work throughout the day and were not made to carry loads of homework back to their homes.

Similarly, with formative assessment being an integral aspect of CCE, there was a *focus on classroom discussion and informal feedback*. It led to reduced stress on recurrent students' testing and marking, which meant condensed workload for teachers.

Now, I don't carry loads of papers to home for checking rather I use that time to read, plan and innovate....I mean academic work has gained

priority over clerical work...(Social Science Teacher, Greenjingle school, 2012)

And now the feedback is spontaneous...I mean the idea of the feedback has always been to report to students their errors and adopt an appropriate corrective measure.....but... when we used to do it by marking tests we somehow reduced student's error to a numerical value which does not communicate the problem. ... While with informal feedback, teacher can diagnose the problem on the run and provide feedback on the run...continuity is there (Language Teacher, Greenjingle school, 2012)

In this manner, structural changes and ideological changes enabled a sharpened focus on students' learning, which subsequently increased their achievement. One of the teachers observed:

We are doing this not just for the policy compulsions, we are doing it for the kids (Mathematics Teacher, Greenjingle school, 2012) pointing out that student satisfaction and learning were the major focus driving change.

These changes at the classroom level energised students, which consequently enhanced teacher's satisfaction and increased engagement in SBPLC meetings. Teachers reported:

I can see them enjoying talking with each other, taking collective decisions, and working as a group....I think they enjoy me being one of them and they becoming leaders of the class.....you see....a kind of reversal of roles somehow giving them.....unnn..... increased motivation...(Mrs. Meena, Principal, Greenjingle school, 2011)

This increased level of motivation among students was nevertheless a source of inspiration for teachers.

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Second, *constant provision of academic support* provided by collaboration in SBPLCs, accompanied with a strong sense of professional trust expressed by the administration in the capacities and abilities of their teachers, created a positive wave towards the initiative. This eventually sustained the momentum of reform in school—based PLCs and the school.

Implications for practice

Bansal (2017) observed that the establishment of SBPLC has tremendous power to empower teachers as assessment leaders. SBPLCs work towards developing positive teachers' mental models – the “schemas” or maps which they draw on to guide their professional practice, (Seashore, Anderson & Riedel, 2003) which is quintessential for the successful assimilation of assessment reform. It is elaborated through this paper that for the successful establishment and sustainability of PLCs in the school context, school management should:

- Ensure constant academic support through continuous professional development opportunities;
- Provide flexibility and autonomy to teachers to adapt their practices according to their group of learners;
- Express professional trust in its professionals;
- Make arrangements for infrastructure supportive of reform;
- In addition, foster parent-school ties.

Thereby, enabling teachers to become “assessment leaders” who could carry forward the reform intelligently, supported with a deep conviction of its benefits to the student community.

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