PEHPP 2019
Pedagogical Education: History, Present Time, Perspectives

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF TEACHERS AS REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the phenomenon of building a professional learning community of teachers as a reflective teaching practice within school itself. The main characteristics of a professional learning community of teachers are substantiated and described: values shared by all teachers, focus on improving students' educational results, orientation towards the development of pedagogical leadership, support culture expressed in respect and trust in each other, collective nature of actions based on collaboration and cooperation, exploratory nature of the community's activity, single information space, simple and understandable research tools that all teachers use; ongoing professional communication, vertical and horizontal connections, construction of matrix networks, open and public nature of the community. The authors of the article defined reflective practice as a key tool for professional development of a teacher. Characteristic features of reflective practice are: equal positions, tasks for self-reflection and mutual evaluation, reflective position of participants; object of reflection. Speaking about the improvement of teaching and learning, the authors noted that reflective practice is not a single action, but a cycle of continuous learning. Research has shown that building a professional learning community through methodology based on teachers 'mutual attendance of lessons with subsequent reflection allows the participants to focus on certain elements that facilitate deep insight into their practice in the context of professional activity when solving specific pedagogical problems.

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Keywords: Professional Learning Communities of Teachers, principals of reflective practice, signs of reflective practice, reflection, reflective practice, conditions for the development of reflective practice.

1. Introduction

The term "professional pedagogical community" is generally accepted in Russia. Nevertheless, it is necessary to study professional communities of teachers in terms of reflective practices potential in the Russian theory and practice of school. The idea of introducing professional learning communities into schools was borrowed from business.

Any professional learning community is the result of a three-level interaction in which the school, the region, and the state as a whole take part (Fullan, 2005). The school level is a direct "field of action", which is why it is given the most attention in the research literature (Bradea, 2017). However, the levels of the region and the state are no less important. At the level of state policy, the task is to change the school model of the professional learning community.

Today, more and more Western European schools are introducing professional learning communities to develop collective potential of educational organization aiming to provide "education for everyone". The key element for developing a professional learning community is focus on building a culture that goes beyond collaboration. If teachers do not interact with each other or with another group of teachers, getting a constructive feedback can be challenging (Stewart, 2014).

School leaders are to improve structural and relational nature of teachers' collaboration through the use of new models of control, evaluation, and professional development that solves the problems of the teamwork of a teacher (Hord, 2004). It is important to create space, time, structure and training for teachers to work together (Gajda & Koliba, 2008).

Creating and maintaining the functioning of professional learning communities in Russian schools requires certain methodology. It is necessary to take into account Russian peculiarities: the lack of skills of long-term voluntary association of teachers aiming to achieve particular goal, as well as the attitude to interaction as to a secondary activity (the main thing is to give a lesson). The most important thing to consider when introducing a professional learning community is that it is a continuous, endless learning process that has a profound effect on the structure and culture of school, as well as on the atmosphere and professional practices in it (Mullen, 2008).

2. Problem Statement

We view the activity of the professional learning community as a reflective practice. Reflective practice of teachers in professional learning communities includes reflection and critical analysis of actions with the aim to improve professional practice. Teachers discuss significant professional and personal issues with colleagues. Reflective practices improve teaching processes and help teachers understand what is needed to change the educational environment. This is a special kind of practice, because the object of research is the educational practice itself (Peters, 1991). Professional training carried out in professional learning communities is effective because it is based on self-development (Stoll et al., 2006)

The use of reflective practice requires both knowledge of practice and understanding of professional and personal philosophy of students. With the help of the ability to reflect, which includes a number of basic intellectual skills, one can control one's own professional activity in conditions of indeterminacy. Taken together, these key skills constitute a kind of reflective technology, with the help of which the

teacher's professional expertise is improved (Dautova, 2013). Development of pedagogical mastery is impossible without pedagogical creativity, communication, acceleration of the processes of thinking and activity which requires creation of a reflective environment. Condition for the development of reflective practice is the work of teachers' professional community.

3. Research Questions

3.1. What is the nature of professional learning community of teachers?

3.2. What are the main characteristics of professional learning community of teachers?

3.3. What are the features of the reflective practice of teachers in training within the team?

4. Purpose of the Study

Studying the professional learning communities of teachers helps to reveal their key characteristics for organizing reflective practices, as well as the possibility of introducing this type of activity in an educational institution.

The article describes the specifics of building a professional learning community of teachers that promote reflective practice and improve the quality of teaching.

The results of the study can be used in the process of introduction of professional learning community of teachers and organization of reflective practices in educational institutions within school itself.

5. Research Methods

Research of the nature of a professional learning community of teachers and its characteristics, as well as the basic principles of reflective practices organization demanded to study scientific literature on this topic and experiments conducted.

It should be noted that in the considered studies of building a professional learning communities of teachers, the principles of school organization as it is are applied. Professional interaction of teachers in Russia today is based on the Lesson Study methodology; the practice of building teams of learning teachers (TLT) that work on a specific problem is engaged, and coaching approaches for teachers training are being intensively introduced.

Having studied the methods available, and analyzed the level of teachers professional interaction in school and preschool institutions, we came to the conclusion that curatorial technique is optimal for use at the initial stage of building a professional learning community in the institutions of this kind when under development.

One school was involved in the study of professional learning community building; two schools were used to compare the level of school social capital and teachers' reflection. "Curatorial technique" was used when building a professional learning community of teachers (Ushakov, 2017). Interaction of teachers was carried out in groups of three, where two teachers after visiting each others' lessons came to the curator for reflective practice. The curator was in a coaching position. Each participant was equal in decision making. It is recommended to select teachers interested in learning and reflection so that the benefits of this

partnership were mutual (Boye & Meixner, 2010). The experiment was conducted in both school and preschool institutions, while the "curatorial technique" in Russian preschool institutions had never been introduced before. New protocols were developed to capture changes in the lesson at school and in kindergarten classes.

A questionnaire survey was conducted among 121 teachers and 760 students to estimate the quality of teaching at the lesson with an ascertaining experiment and 191 teachers (from three schools) with a formative experiment. Teachers who expressed a voluntary desire to participate in the study were previously trained in new practice of interaction according to the "curatorial technique" and peculiarities of working in groups of three.

Qualitative and analytical processing of the results was carried out. A survey of teachers was performed according to "Social capital of an educational organization" methodology (Ushakov, 2017). Monitoring of changes was based on the result analysis of the quality of teacher training and observation of the process followed by questioning the students (evaluation sheet for classroom observations and questionnaires for the survey of the teaching staff "Assessing the quality of teaching and components of effective teaching"). Observation of the lesson was carried out using the "Efficient School" technique (Pinskaya, Ponomareva, & Kosaretckiy, 2016). Tools for the level of the professional learning community of teachers assessment were tested as well as expert estimation of the level of reflection among teachers; content analysis of the products of pedagogical activity (classroom attendance map, record book of reflection, protocols and diaries of teachers in training) was done.

6. Findings

Our analysis is allowed us to substantiate that professional learning community of teachers is a group of teachers united by a common goal, acting through reflective practice on the basis of professional communication (exchange of experience, methods, ways of solving professional pedagogical problems), aimed at stimulating teacher's reflection, at teacher's reflexive comprehension of characteristic features of his teaching and quality of the lesson, his mastery of reflection methods and tools, development of reflex skills of self-esteem, formulating goals, posing problematic issues, conducting equal dialogue, etc.

The main characteristics of professional learning community of teachers are identified:

- common vision of the development of an educational organization (school), common understanding of the goals of its functioning at the mission and strategy level, harmonization of values, norms and pedagogical tasks of a certain level and individual classroom as a whole, ultimately shared by all teachers values;
- PLCT focus on improving the education results of students;
- commitment to pedagogical leadership development (a teacher as a leader for his students, having the characteristics of a 21st century student; a colleague as a leader in the field of teaching, able to communicate the best teaching practices; school administrator as a leader-manager);
- support culture developed at the level of professional interaction between the administration and teachers, teachers and students, within the teaching staff, manifesting itself in respect and trust in each other;

- collective nature of actions based on collaboration and cooperation as the interaction of the main subjects of the process, manifested in individual and collective responsibility;
- community activity is of a research nature, proceeds within a integrated information space, all teachers exercise simple and understandable research tools;
- community activity is based on continuous professional communication; Continuous professional communication is a form of collective communication that can be realized both through direct, personal contact and online in order to broaden professional knowledge and competencies of teachers and to achieve high educational results of students.
- community structure is characterized by vertical and horizontal connections and by building matrix networks.
- community activity is open and public which encourages communication of PLCT expertise throughout educational practice.

In the course of scientific literature studying and carrying out a formative experiment characteristics, conditions and principles of the implementation of reflective practice of in-house training were revealed.

Characteristics of reflective practice: equality of position, tasks for self-reflection and mutual evaluation that create conditions for mutual transitions; reflective standpoint of participants; subject of reflection which can include quality of teaching, teaching practice, pedagogical activity in the context of student teaching.

Conditions for reflective practice development: respect and trust in each other; judgmental factor minimization, reflective component actualization in the dialogue; cooperation and co-creation in the development of new educational practices with subsequent access to these practices for other teachers.

Principles of reflective practice: openness, feedback, reflective circle, minimizing of judgmental evaluation in the assessment of each other; cooperation and co-creation, mutual support.

The main advantages of participating in professional learning communities are: developing leadership skills, building trust, openness, common vision of school mission emerging and crystallizing and professional development.

Unfortunately, studies show that school administration perceives the formation of professional learning communities of teachers as a short-term task, whilst it should become gradual and long-term practice of transforming school environment, and possibly it's organizational structure.

At present, the process of introducing professional learning communities at schools should be recognized as incomplete. Previous attempts could have been more successful if more attention had been given to failures and reflection had been engaged. This means that each process is adaptive, there are general rules and it is difficult to imagine how, taking into account the characteristics of the organization, the process of building a professional learning community will go on. By studying the dynamics of teacher's interaction and their mutual estimation of professional development, it is possible to assess the degree of development of professional learning community of teachers.

The key element of the development of a professional learning community is focus on building a culture that goes beyond conventional, generally accepted collaboration. Therefore, if teachers do not

interact with each other or with another group of teachers, obtaining constructive feedback can be a complicated task.

The role of reflective dialogue is key to creating favorable opportunity for learning for teachers – members of professional learning communities. This dialogue influences the process of collective development, which is a source for instruction and professional growth for the benefit of their students. Teachers discuss significant professional and personal issues with colleagues. Professional training in professional learning communities is considered to be the most effective if it is based on self-development.

It was noted that reflective issues contribute to understanding and awareness of pedagogical process. Teachers attended classes and then took notes in their record books of reflection.

Reflective essays and questionnaires analysis showed that teachers' work experience does not guarantee a high level of professional reflection. This can be seen in the distribution of reflective essays according to the level of professional reflection (high (H), medium (M), low (L)):

- the level of professional reflection with 1-8 years of work experience: H - 4%, M - 65%, L - 31%;
- the level of professional reflection with 9-15 years of work experience: H - 15%, M - 40%, L - 40%;
- the level of professional reflection with more than 16 years of work experience: H - 12%, M - 29%, L - 59%.

A high level of professional reflection is observed in the smallest group of teachers. Teachers give full and voluminous answers to questions, formulate the goals of professional activity correctly, and apply pedagogical technologies. Teachers themselves formulate questions for reflection and give answers to them.

Teachers from the group with an average level of reflection answered questions related to pedagogical problems and suggested ways of solving them, identified professional shortcomings and offered ways of dealing with them ("when there is a problem in communicating with a child, I solve it myself or I turn to the social counselor and psychologist", "when I face a difficult problem, I turn to a colleague", "we plan a lesson together"). All members of this group look for solutions to their professional problems or build mutual relationships with colleagues to solve these problems. When measuring the profundity of reflection in this group, positive dynamics can be seen, which shows that mutual attendance of lessons has a positive impact on the development of the very skill of professional reflection.

In the group with a low level of reflection, teachers noted that answers to questions related to pedagogical problems and ways of solving them got answers of organizational nature not pedagogical one. The teachers are focused not on the quality of teaching, but on their own problems and failures and accuse students in pedagogical problems ("reluctant to learn", "do not apply knowledge", "we must involve parents", "students do not understand", "they won't need it in life"). The answers are formulated succinctly and concisely, the wording is incomprehensible and goal-setting of classes is formal. At the discussion and working with questions, they explain: "there is not enough time", "there is no time to write down questions and answers"

During the reflection laconic answers were given to the questions, as a rule they described their professional experience and what they saw in the lesson, without explanation and analysis. Basically, all teachers kept their convictions ("I am convinced of the correctness of my actions", "my beliefs have not changed") at the beginning of the experiment and changed their views after the experiment ("I agree that a lot depends on the teacher", "if a teacher will think a lesson over he will get a result").

The results show that each teacher participating in the research was refocused on the results (achievements) of students. Teachers felt satisfied because their personal professionalism was recognized; they understood the importance of developing teacher leadership. The experiment also revealed the culture of joint cooperation between teachers and support during reflective practices.

7. Conclusion

Building professional learning communities is one of the main trends in the development of education, as it helps to solve pedagogical problems: lack of motivation and low level of knowledge acquisition by students, lack of a shared vision of the mission and values of the organization, lack of collective practices and collective decision-making on the development of the school. Achieving group effectiveness through building a professional learning community of teachers is one of the key managerial strategic decisions.

Andragogical approach is applied in the study for the first time to view professional learning community of teachers as a reflective practice.

This made it possible to clarify the definition of a professional learning community and its main characteristics as a community of adult learners.

Regarding reflection as the basis, the core of a professional learning community has allowed to provide a systematic analysis of reflective practice and to obtain the principles, characteristic features and conditions of reflective practice of teachers.

While building a professional community of teachers, it was revealed that this is a laborious process. It is effective when working with young specialists, as well as teachers who had a break in their work record. It serves as an effective tool for professional development. It must be borne in mind that different schools will respond differently to the introduction of new practices.

Analyzing the reflective essays of teachers participating in the experiment which aims at building a professional learning community of teachers as reflective practice, the authors of the article revealed a key positive quality related to the professional development of teachers, which manifested itself in enriching their professional experience and improving the quality of the lesson.

Reflective practice is a key skill for a teacher's professional development, making it possible to identify his strengths and weaknesses and improve practice through reflective process. The study proved that reflective practice is necessary for teachers in schools and nursery teachers in kindergartens (pre-school departments).

Teachers note that the approach used in the organization to achieve group collective effectiveness contributed to professional rapprochement, especially at the stage of reflection, which was a special kind of continuous professional activity and contributed to the formation of objective self-esteem.

The study has obvious prospects due to the lack of any description of the experience in the formation of PLCT, introduction of a curatorial technique in preschool institutions, use of this methodology for the formation of PLCT and the insufficient study of professional learning community in Russia.

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