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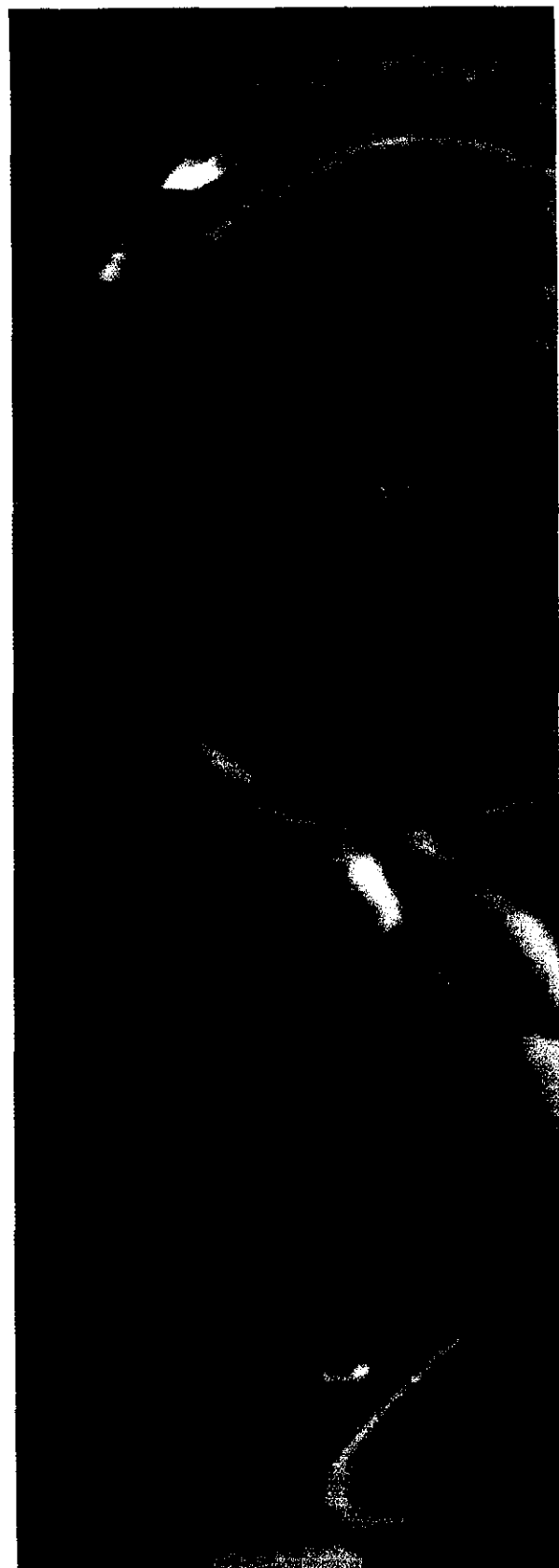
learning

IDENTITY CRISIS

EXTERNAL COACHES STRUGGLE TO CLARIFY ROLES
AND MAINTAIN FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

By Julie Horwitz, Janice Bradley, and Linda Hoy

I n a professional learning community, adults learn through focused conversations on teaching practices and teacher learning to support student learning. Teachers in a professional learning community push each other's thinking and learning about teaching through questioning. While there are multiple opportunities for this critical thinking to occur, it is a process that takes time, commitment, coaching, and facilitation.

As external coaches working with professional learning communities, we struggled to define our roles and responsibilities. Through these challenges, we learned about our responsibility to share tools, strategies, and protocols for learning community members to focus conversations on teaching practices and student learning. Further, we uncovered the need for all members to develop shared values and vision. As a result, we have a renewed awareness of critical strategies necessary to use in our second year of partnership with the secondary professional learning communities. Given the chance to engage with developing professional learning communities in the rural Southwest through learning opportunities and ongoing dialogue, we learned about the immense potential of such communities at individual school sites.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES DEFINED

While the professional learning community is regarded as an effective school improvement strategy and structure, it has been defined and characterized in various ways. There is general agreement that a learning community focuses on professional learning together. However, the variations consider multiple perspectives and needs.

Hord and Sommers (2008) describe the professional learning community as a group of professionals learning in community and characterize the learning community as a group having shared beliefs, values, and vision; shared and supportive leadership; collective learning and its application; supportive conditions; and shared personal practice. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) describe a professional learning community as "educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 4). Fullan (2000) talks about a professional learning community as a group of teachers who meet regularly to focus on student work through assessment and change their instructional practices accordingly. The enactment and implementation of professional learning communities by classroom teachers is as varied as the definitions above. For the purposes of this partnership, we have created our own working definition of professional learning communities: time and space for teachers to talk, collaborate, reflect, plan, and learn together.

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

As university faculty, we learned that we lacked definitions of our roles and responsibilities as external partners. University and K-12 partnerships can be valuable in numerous ways if they are well-defined and purposeful (Digby & Gartin, 1993). In successful professional learning communities, external partners help with organization, timing, and resources. The external partner often acts as a coach to gently guide the group to areas of enlightenment and productivity. When members are at a standstill, the coach can push the conversation and ask probing questions that might be uncomfortable for colleagues to ask one another.

OUR PROJECT

We (three university faculty members) spent one aca-demic year working with secondary math educators in professional learning communities at three different schools in the rural Southwest. Over the course of one academic year, we collected data through surveys, transcripts of math learning community meetings, notes from learning sessions, and ongoing communication. We created and facilitated two professional learning experiences focused on the structure and protocols for developing and maintaining successful communities. These opportunities allowed members to construct authentic plans they would then use at their respective school sites.

The first year began with just one coach attending one professional learning community meeting at each school each month through the end of the first semester. During the second semester, a different coach took over with the same schedule. The two coaches were in constant communication with each other about their observations at the meetings. The coaches attended each school's schoolwide professional learning community (usually twice a month) and took notes to share with members of the math communities and other coaches. We also met as coaches to discuss issues that were occurring, read common literature on professional learning communities, and supported each other in our coaching roles. We worked with three schools, two middle schools (grades 6-8) and one mid-high school (grades 6-12). The schools were either on or adjacent to Native American reservations. We worked with 22 math teachers and their administrators during the year. While we acknowledge that this is a small sample and by no means claim to generalize that this is what all professional learning community coaches should do, we do believe we have an interesting story that has led us to tackle the tensions of being an external coach in school-based professional learning communities.

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WHAT WE LEARNED

While there were many questions that coaches identified during professional learning community meetings, such as lack of clear roles and misinformation about practice, consistency, time, commitment, or intention, there are two

overarching themes that we will address here: the need to clarify roles and to maintain the focus on student learning in professional learning community dialogue.

CLARIFYING ROLES

We had some confusion about exactly what it was we should be doing as external members and so gave ourselves the name professional learning community coach. We were intentional in this name as we believe in the concept of coaches helping colleagues to move forward to where they want to be as professional educators (Costa & Garmston, 1994). We also felt the need to identify the teacher who organized the logistics and agenda of each meeting as the professional learning community facilitator. All other members of the professional learning community (teachers and sometimes administrators) were referred to as members.

The lack of a clearly defined role for a coach led to confusion and passivity. At times, the coaches thought of probing or clarifying questions to ask. However, we were not clear that our role was to guide or redirect the group's conversation. As a consequence, we tended to be more passive than actively engaged as participant observers (Cresswell, 2003; Merriam, 2001).

> **The lack of a clearly defined role for coaches led us to struggle with how to effectively deal with ethical issues.**

We were often not certain what we would do to help the professional learning community members to "decenter," or shift focus to student learning (Carlson, Bowling, Moore, & Ortiz, 2007). We sometimes walked away frustrated, knowing that there was a lack of talk and evidence around student learning. In a study on the role of facilitator in mathematical professional learning communities, Carlson et al. (2007) explain that to decenter requires that facilitators place themselves in the teachers' shoes. The purpose of decentering is to understand the thinking of all community members to promote stronger dialogue. One finding emphasized the impact of a facilitator on a professional learning community. While Carlson et al. (2007) clearly place the responsibility of decentering on the facilitator, we, as coaches, were beginning to believe that this was a role we should take on to help us better understand community members' thinking and to guide more meaningful student-centered dialogue.

With a goal of decentering the group, the coach asks clarifying questions to refocus the group toward the agreed vision, mission, and goals. It is important for the professional learning community members and the coach to agree that this is one role the coach will take on during meetings. During this work, we observed the need for decentering when some professional learning community members made negative statements about students. Examples include:

- "Even if they don't have the skills, they don't have what it takes to answer questions."
- "It is important to build them up a day or two before the test,

let them know they are smart because generally they are."
- "Try to say it again slower; repetition is really helpful."

MAINTAINING FOCUS ON STUDENTS

The lack of a clearly defined role for coaches led us to struggle with how to effectively deal with ethical issues. We left some statements unchallenged — statements that gave us the sense that some members had low expectations for their students. We wondered if there were members who thought that some students were not smart enough to learn or that some students were just not worth teaching. We've realized that our role is to ask questions when we hear statements that are in direct opposition to what we believe is important for students. If the professional learning community members agree that asking probing and clarifying questions is one of the roles of a coach, there should be no surprise when coaches raise such questions. If we ask questions that challenge professional learning community members and take them outside of their comfort zone, we wonder if this impacts future dialogue and the trust that is so important to the coach/professional learning community group relationship.

As coaches, we now acknowledge that we lacked a shared definition of professional learning community among all participants. While we followed the words of Hord & Sommers (2008) and hoped to create a space for teachers to improve their teaching and student learning, a survey indicated that some members formed a different definition of a professional learning community. Members said:

- "The professional learning community is not a math department meeting."
- "This is a support network for improving instruction."
- "During the professional learning community, we can really share information."

These were merely statements; they were not a shared vision or mission. Because of this lack of shared vision, community members and coaches did not share expectations and found tensions arising between our understanding of what we thought should be happening and what was actually happening in each professional learning community.

We found that often during community meetings, there was a lack of talk around evidence of student learning. In the survey, 56% of respondents stated that members talked about student thinking during professional learning community time. At the same time, 34% of respondents believed that one of the challenges was staying focused on student learning. We concluded that the use of "I" was often evident and shows more emphasis on teacher talk than talk about students. Coaches were concerned about this because teachers were not engaging in critical dialogue but simply complaining about their students.

NEXT STEPS

By the end of the year, we understood that our tensions were

journey toward cultural proficiency means to them. Many have reached an understanding of how the work of equity and access begins as an inside-out approach. The journey for each person begins within.

CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Time and money were the two main challenges in this journey. High-quality external partners are often expensive, especially over time. Weeks, months, and years are required to implement the kind of change we have described. Deep change requires a commitment to time and resources. People get tired and easily frustrated when they do not see immediate results or when they are asked for a long-term commitment of resources, time, and energy.

An investment in human capital is important and necessary. Not all organizations appreciate the need to develop people as a resource. Fortunately, this organization valued its human resources with the financial commitment to long-term, meaningful professional development. A large part of the investment in human capital was to develop our own experts. We now have cognitive coaching agency trainers and adaptive schools associate trainers. The Instructional Services Division has served as

the home for the Center for Culturally Proficient Practice for the past five years. We have turned our challenges into opportunities to generate resources for our own social and human capital in ways to support our growth and the needs of the schools we serve.

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Identity crisis

opportunities for growth in future professional learning communities. Our intention is to focus professional learning community talk on learning by clearly defining roles for coaches, facilitators, and members. We would like to continue using de-centering as a central strategy and plan to support facilitators with creating common visions and frameworks for individual professional learning communities. More than anything else, as coaches, we commit to challenging and unpacking the difficult conversations that act as barriers to what ultimately leads to increased teacher learning.

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