Abstract

The study reported here is part of a wider multi-sited collaborative work between researchers and graduate students from higher education institutions and teachers and administrators from the public elementary school system in Nuevo León Mexico. The specific focus of this paper is to describe the process of research as well as some findings. It also tries to address the emergence of patterns of collaboration given among teachers as they try to improve their teaching practices.

By investigating how teachers work collaboratively, this paper tries to stress the idea that gaining knowledge on how teachers organize themselves to solve problems and attempt to become a learning community could offer opportunities for other communities to move towards better standards of educational quality.

Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to show preliminary findings from a qualitative multiple-case study from two Mexican elementary public schools. The research question that guided this project was: What happens when teachers engage
collaboratively in projects related to improve their teaching practices? We believe that answering this question would provide evidence about the process involved in building a collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994) where teachers can work collaboratively in order to improve their educational practices and eventually expand this effort to other schools creating learning communities. This would lead to an eventual breaking from the traditional school structure where teachers usually work in an isolated way (Lortie, 1975).

The specific research objectives of this study are the following: (1) To get evidence about the process of building a learning community by observing what occurred when teachers engaged collaboratively to solve a problem from their teaching practices, (2) to identify the emergent categories of a learning community.

Theoretical framework

Community, collegiality, collaboration, cooperation, and connectedness have become frequent terms in the literature on improvement in schools. A review of the current literature suggests that many authors recommend a more collegial working environment and building community to promote K-12 school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1996, Miller, 1998, or Elizondo Huerta, 2001a and 2001b).

Many authors believe that building a community contributes to school reform. Lambert, et al (1995) and Sergiovani (1994) suggest that a new metaphor to describe schools as a community of learners, has replaced the factory model that used to emphasize production and uniformity. Peterson (1992) as well as Zepeda (2004) argue that our traditional approach to education is one-sided and does not address the complexity of teaching and learning and that the concept of community uncovers another possibility for understanding teachers work.

The teacher of the future will work within a professional learning community (Hargreaves, 2000, Louis & Mark, 1998) as a creator of contextualized professional knowledge (Lewis, 2003) in a world where “education will become the centre of the knowledge society and the school its key institution” (Drucker, 1994: 9).

Research on the work of teachers (Lortie, 1975: Goodlad, 1983; Sarason, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001) shows that teachers work in an isolated way. In the workplace there is a lack of collegial opportunities for sharing and interaction. Schools rarely have a sharing culture which is vital to solve everyday problems more efficiently. Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) indicate that teachers in the future need to support a transformative curriculum philosophy, to become knowledge workers.

Hord (1997) establishes that a professional learning community is one in which teachers and administrators continuously seek and share learning, and subsequently act upon this learning. The term community of practice has been appropriated by Lave and Wegner (1991) for a particular theoretical perspective that attributes all learning to engagement in the activities of such communities. Their focus tends to be on the reproductive nature of such communities as newcomers are inducted and continue to acquire competence and status within them. These authors consistently emphasise commonalities rather than diversity.

Modes of inquiry
Research approach. In this study we used a multiple case study design (Yin 2003, Merrian 1998) to generate a detailed description and rich understanding of how the collaborative learning community process takes place in the two schools selected.

Context of this study: This study was conducted in two public elementary schools located in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon (Mexico): (A) Alfonso Reyes school with 24 teachers and approximately 360 students. (B) Luis Tijerina Almaguer is a school with very similar characteristics in terms of student population and size.

Participants. The participants of this study were 7 voluntary female teachers, in total; 4 in school A and 3 in school B. Their teaching experience was varied. Some teachers were considered as experts or experienced while others were classified as novice or less experienced.

Data sources

Data collection: Multiple data sources were used and they included multiple on-site observations of events and processes. The researchers undertook the role described by Wolcot (1988) as a privileged observer – “someone who is known and trusted and given easy access to information” (p.35).

Participant observations of events and processes in context were recorded as researchers’ notes. Teachers’ interviews were audio-taped and transcribed at two intervals during the process. In order to analyze data we used the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser 1978).

Data analysis: A coding and notation process (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was used to classify and further define and categorize concurrent themes in the data. Categories were generated in order to organize and make sense of specific data. Finally, categories were examined for significant patterns and for redundancy and overlapping.

Research procedure: It was carried out in two stages described below.

First stage: Approaching the school. The first stage of the process consisted on choosing the schools and introducing the project to the teachers and administrators.

The main criterion to choose schools was their willingness to participate in the project voluntarily. Once the schools accepted, the project was presented first to the principal of the schools and then to the group of teachers.

2. Entering schools.
The first encounter with teachers consisted on explaining the project and the roles and responsibilities of each of the participants involved. Once there was a group of teachers willing to participate, teams were formed.
Second stage: Teachers’ projects. Once the teams were integrated, each school decided to work on a project based on one of the problems they had identified.

1. Identifying a problem.
The projects were identified through a brainstorming session where teachers talked about their interest in improving specific areas of their practice.

2. Developing a project: logistics, schedule, activities, teachers, researchers and research assistants’ roles.

In order to develop the projects it was necessary to design the logistics where the roles of researchers, assistant researchers and participant teachers were decided. A schedule of meetings and planning sessions every week was agreed upon, and the structure of the sessions and activities was planned.

In this study we show a preliminary analysis and reconstruction of research notes from observations and in-depth interviews. The following categories emerged from the data:

- Reciprocal teaching and learning between experts and novice teachers
- Attitude towards introducing a new project in the school
- Recognizing the significance and worth of a learning community.

Reciprocal teaching and learning between experts and novice teachers.

This category appeared frequently through in-depth interviews as well as in the meetings between researchers and teachers in both schools. Teachers recognize that the meeting is a good opportunity to know what is going on in other classrooms. During these meetings, teachers have had the opportunity to share with their peers some classroom management strategies, checking attendance and tracking homework, as well as teaching strategies.

Sharing classroom management strategies: Meetings usually started with concerns about teaching practices. Most of the time teachers are looking for advice from their colleagues. For example, Socorro, an experienced teacher, comments that in her 5th grade class there are 29 students, 20 males and 9 females. Her classroom has frequent discipline problems. Many of the students do not behave well and it is difficult for her to control them all the time. She notices that the female students are a bit more dedicated than the males.

When Socorro comments, Martha, another experienced teacher, suggests that Socorro try some strategies such as asking the students to state the rules of the classroom in order to give them the opportunity to discuss and negotiate them as well as to take responsibility for their actions and respect the classroom norms. Once the rules have been discussed and the students have agreed, the results will be posted in front of the classroom so that the students can see them all the time. Martha shares that one rule in her 6th grade classroom is that
the students do not need to ask for permission to go to the bathroom, instead, they may feel free to leave come and go as needed without disturbing the class. Martha says "If you create a trusting classroom environment and you believe in your students, they will believe in you. This situation will allow your students to see you in a [more respectful] different way."

Sharing strategies to improve attendance and to track homework. One of the teachers’ meetings was about homework. Celia, a novice teacher, commented that she believes that homework is essential for students’ learning. She also stressed the importance of assigning and grading homework in order to give feedback to the students about their progress in the subject. She said that she used to put annotations directly on the assignment so that the parents could see that she verified whether the student had done his or her homework or not. She did this because she felt that she had to create a good impression on the parents. Also, she commented that 9 of her students consistently did not do their assignments, and furthermore, that 6 of these students had discipline problems.

After this comment Martha replied that although she recognizes that homework is fundamental for student learning she admits that most of the time she does not check assignments. She sees her main responsibility as teaching and the main responsibility of the students as paying attention, learning, and doing homework. Martha said:

Most of my students do their homework, except for 2 or 3 students who do not do their assignments. Every week I used to ask the students for their homework all of a sudden, without warning them. If a student did not do his or her homework I would give him or her a low grade in the subject.

I would like to share a simple homework format. Every day the students have to write their assignments in the format and the teacher signs it. If the student does not do the assignment his or her parents need to sign, indicating that they know that their son or daughter did not do the assignment. It is the responsibility of the student to bring the format in the next day, as well as the assignments they owe.

Three weeks later, Socorro comments that she has used the homework format in her class and has found it to be a good resource. Now almost of the students are doing their assignments. Also, Lizeth, a novice teacher, comments that she has also been using the format and that she has made some modifications according to her specific needs.

Elsa, an expert teacher, also shared a class attendance format which was considered by her peers to be an excellent resource. This format was modified later and enriched by the teachers according to their needs.
Sharing teaching strategies. Maria, a novice teacher, asked for some help in teaching mathematics. Martha suggested the following strategy:

I used to think that it was easy and pragmatic to teach mathematics to the entire classroom using the blackboard. Later, I realized that students learn more individually, working with their books and notebooks. I usually explain and give feedback to my students in those specific steps which they do not understand.

It was noticeable that not only expert teachers shared their experience with novice teachers; also novice teachers gave fresh ideas to their peers. For instance, Leticia, a novice teacher who had read Vygotsky suggested that the students could read short stories, poems and legends to each other in pairs, instead of listening to the teacher.

As has been pointed out by these examples, novice teachers acknowledge that they need help from expert teachers in different issues (Lemlech and Hertztog, 1999). In the organizational learning model by Senge (1990), this acknowledgment is recognized as personal mastery.

Attitudes toward introducing a new project in the school

To access the schools we asked for permission from SE (Secretaría de Educación-State Education Department) the Department in charge of public education in the country. They gave us a list of schools with the characteristics needed for our research. We went to each one of them looking for the acceptance of the directors so we could introduce our project to the teachers. This was the first moment we faced rejection. One of our first objectives was the absolute voluntary willingness of the educational community; unfortunately in a school system with vertical order structure, this was impossible. The answer of most of the teachers was:

“We do not have time for working with you”.

The problem of time complicates and confuses the implementation of changes in teachers’ daily routine, tasks and assessments. This problem may not be solved in an immediate way without a previous consensus that there is a necessity to transform individuals and institutions that represent a specific social interest. The concrete needs identified in this consensus would allow focusing the attention of specialists in order to elaborate adequate projects (García, 2006).

The school, visualized as a micro cosmos, where traditions, national values, a working culture and political interests of different nature flow, is the filter that conditions its comfort, harmony and safety. The introduction of a change is seen as an irruption which becomes a mismatch in the conceptual structure that has been used to work for decades by the school. (2006)
At the beginning, it was not easy for the researchers to introduce the Project in both schools. Almost all of the teachers refused participating in it. The majority of them showed disagreement, resistance and hostility to the researchers in their interest to show the researchers their rejection of the project. The reasons that they gave us were that they were already involved in too many projects from the Department of Education, and that it was a demanding work. Even though we presented some arguments saying that our project would not overwhelm them with a new project in school, their answers were the same. We explained to them that working collaboratively in teams and building a learning community, the ongoing projects would facilitate their work solving problems and sharing experiences. Finally only four female teachers from school A accepted and 3 from school B.

Resistances seem to form part of almost all of the functions or elements in a phenomenological world where movement is the guideline of these transformations. Everyday, each individual and each element looks to the past as a signal of change. This encounter between past and future is a generator of anxiety and hostility to everything that implies facing mistakes or accepting a loss with the purpose of visualizing what is necessary to change. The pattern of teachers resistance presented in these schools has been recurrent also in the process of finding voluntary schools to participate in this project (flores, e. Flores, M. García, M. y Rodríguez, G., 2006). Teachers and administrators seem to be pressured to accomplish high standards of testing students’ learning and to carry out bureaucratic issues from the State Department of Education. One teacher expresses:

If we participate, very soon they are going to institutionalize that project and then we will have more work to do.

The social object surrounded by stimuli that determines specific perspectives has not accomplished itself yet. Still, it is imperative to assimilate new things: integrate objectives, ideas, information; to create needs, bonds; to transform him or herself according to their circumstances. This individual will have to adopt a change attitude to new things that at first sight they may find unusual, but that would influence his or her professional development.

This finding is supported by Hargreaves and Goodson (2006:3) who establish that “In this age of standardization and marketization, the aging boomer cohort has become increasingly cynical about successive, accelerating waves of contradictory reforms that have culminated in systems of standardization that are eroding teacher autonomy, narrowing the curriculum, and undermining the idea of teaching as a broader social mission”. Nevertheless, considering the logical interdependence that exists between object and context, trying to separate in a simple way the limits between both, would result difficult. Once again the problem of time is pressing teachers not helping them to achieve their accomplishments, resisting their desires and perceived as an enemy of their freedom, or so it seems.
Recognizing the significance and worth of a learning community.

Teachers recognized that the weekly meetings provided them with a space to share ideas and talk in a caring and reflective atmosphere. Teachers began to make sense of a learning community. As Zepeda observes the importance of dialogue from one of the studies conducted with a group of teachers, “the opportunities for teachers to talk helped “glue” the learning community together” (2004: 148). In our study, teachers expressed how good it has been to have some time off class in order to meet and talk about what they do in class. Rosy, one of the teachers says:

*The working meetings were very good. I liked them because we had a lot of freedom to talk and give our opinions. It was actually this atmosphere which allowed our initiative to start one of the reading projects.*

Teacher educators have found that when both novice and experienced teachers work collaboratively, both groups become more reflective, critical and analytical of their teaching behaviors. With time, they may develop a sense of pedagogical partnerships o community “because they have the opportunity to engage in shared dialogue and critical inquiry.” (Levin & Rock 2003: 136). Therefore the potential for this type of work among teachers is that of becoming a stronger learning community. Both experienced and novice teachers reported benefits of working as a community as it is expressed by the two following comments. Imelda, another experienced teacher comments:

*The activities we carried out in order to get the objective of the reading Project helped us in other areas, such as socialising among students and how they improved their relationship with their classmates.*

Karina, a less experienced teacher adds:

*Among the objectives of the Project I can remember the one about enriching our practice teaching with our experiences and those of other teachers, reflecting on our own practices and our role as part of the learning community.*

Throughout the course of the project, we observed that it was actually, Aidée, the less experienced teacher, who became the leader of the group proposing ideas of projects and organizing most of the activities for outside the classroom such as a Book Fair, a Story Teller Show and an open house activity “Adopting a reader” where students from different grades read for each other, regardless of the their proficiency level.
This issue of teachers working together touches another crucial point: there is a need to move away from traditional educational practices based on a trainer-based or trainer-centered process. By working on their own, with the guidance of the researchers, teachers become the center of their own professional development, active agents in their learning process (Sparks & Hirsch, cited in Levin & Rock, 2000).

As the sessions progressed during the semester we worked with the group of teachers, they became involved with identifying problems they needed to solve, sharing skills, ideas, reflections, and the best of their teaching practices. Aydéé, the youngest and less experienced teacher in the group expressed how important it had been for her to work on their own realities:

*We looked, among the teachers who were in the Project, for the problem which we thought was affecting our teaching and I liked that very much because we worked from our own reality in our school; we didn't work over “suggested” realities [by the researchers].*

In this way, the group of teachers engaged in a process of reflective action research as identified by Levin & Rock (2003) where the group goes beyond merely solving problems.

Two different projects were carried out by the teachers. Teachers from School A developed learning strategies in mathematics and language through the Dimensions of Learning Model by Marzano, R. et al (1992) whereas teachers from School B developed a reading club project. Through the process of developing their projects teachers recognized the importance of synergy between them in order to obtain other views and perspectives from their peers. Gloria puts it this way:

*I am very happy with the results of the project and would like to invite my other colleagues to join this type of activities because they help us improve our teaching practices.*

Karla, the most experienced teacher in the group said about working as a team:

*The work we did was seen more as a way of helping us rather than an extra load. We always felt supported in what we needed as we worked collaboratively.*

**Conclusions**

The preliminary findings suggest that building communities in Mexican elementary public schools is promising, although there are still some problems to overcome.
Despite the fact that teacher participation in learning communities is completely voluntary, according to our observations a good number of teachers and administrators do not want to participate. The reasons they give are usually related to time constraints, the school is involved in too many projects and they are overwhelmed. It is possible that school structure does not allow teachers to participate and learn (Flores & Flores, 2005; Flores, Flores & Garcia 2006). However for those teachers who are willing to participate, they have a chance to discover a friendly space to learn, to reflect, to identify and solve problems while they share experiences in order to improve their own practices and students’ academic achievement. The process allows teachers to create projects and experiences themselves as a learning community.

Through this project teachers acknowledge the fact that they have learned from their peers; that it has been is an opportunity for novice teachers to learn from expert teachers and vice versa.

**Educational or scientific importance f the study**

In the area of teacher education, building a learning community has been addressed as a need in order to achieve professionalization and promote educational change. Teachers in schools don’t always have the time or willingness to participate in projects where novice and expert teachers can share ideas to grow both individually and as a team. Finding the patterns that a group of teachers go through on their way to become a learning community may throw light onto other teaching practices and inform educational theory from an empirical point of view.
References


