Overview of Research on Intentional Learning Communities, Facilitative Leadership, and Other Approaches to Adult Collaborative Learning

Compiled by Kevin Fahey and Jacy Ippolito, Co-Directors of the SRI Research Initiative.

The School Reform Initiative supports educators as they learn from and with each other to build schools that are committed to educational equity and excellence. Our core approaches — including intentional learning communities, facilitative leadership, and a variety of collaborative learning frameworks — are based on important research that connects schoolwide professional communities to improvements in pedagogy to gains in student learning. For example, Kruse and Louis (1993) studied six urban schools and found that how adults worked and learned together was an important driver of improvements in teacher practice and student learning. Similarly, researchers overseeing the School Restructuring Study of 24 elementary, middle, and high schools nationwide found that schoolwide professional community correlated both with authentic pedagogy and student performance (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Furthermore, Newmann (1994) demonstrated how teacher collaboration, reflection, and a willingness to deprivatize practice were able to improve teacher practice and student learning, while, Bryk and Schneider (2002) found an important connection between the levels of trust in schools and teacher capacity to enact pedagogical reforms and increase student learning. A six-year longitudinal study of the Chicago Public Schools established that school-based professional community and teachers’ capacity for professional learning were highly associated with improvements in classroom instruction and student learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

Overall, such research suggests that improvements in teaching practice that leverage increased student learning are connected to teacher communities that are collaborative, reflective, and focused on teacher practice and student learning (Bryk, Harding, & Greenberg, 2012; Carroll, Fulton, & Doerr, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012; Stoll & Louis, 2007).

SRI promotes the establishment and improvement of collaborative, reflective adult learning in many forms and contexts, including existing learning groups such as grade level or content area teams, professional learning communities, action research groups or school leadership teams, as well as in highly articulated approaches such as transformational learning communities. In all these contexts, structured conversations or protocols and skilled facilitation play essential roles in building and sustaining adult learning within reflective, collaborative, learning-focused school communities (Breidenstein, Fahey, Glickman, & Hensley, 2012). A robust literature supports the power of protocols to guide discussion in schools and the importance of skilled facilitation in maximizing the learning from those discussions (Allen & Blythe, 2004; Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 2007; Colton & Langer, 2005; Easton, 2009; Hatch & Seidel, 1997; J. Hudson, 2003; Ippolito, 2013; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007).

Specifically, the power of the conception of intentional learning communities has been documented in a number of studies, the first of which were conducted by Naves, Dunne, Honts and Lewis (Faith Dunne & Honts, 1998; F. Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000). Building on these foundational studies, various scholars have the work of intentional learning communities at the classroom, school, and district levels (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Cox, 2010; Curry, 2008; Gibbs & Angelides, 2008; J. Hudson, 2005; Law, 2005; Nave,
2000; Silva, 2005; Vo & Nguyen, 2010). Others have shown how these approaches have been used in teacher preparation programs (Franzak, 2002; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011), in professional development settings (Ippolito, 2013; Ippolito & Pomerantz, 2013), with university faculty (Ballock, 2009; Bernacchio, Ross, Washburn, Whitney, & Wood, 2007; Bisplinghoff, 2005), and with school leaders (Fahey, 2011, 2012).

While there is still much work to be done documenting and designing powerful adult collaborative learning communities focused on improving teaching and learning, SRI is forming a compendium of research and resources, guided by a general theory, to support educators as they study and enact these collaborative structures.

Note: Additional research related to adult collaboration and learning, including intentional learning communities and other approaches, can be found on the SRI web site at: schoolreforminitiative.org/resources-and-research/

References*


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