

TEACHER COMMUNITIES AS A MEANS TO SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



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The field of teaching is a dynamic, evolving field since its goals are to fulfil the needs of learners and teachers. Teaching practices in the District of Bogota are not an exemption. The recent General Law of Education required that teachers work institutionally as a team. Therefore, team work is beginning to take place at schools and as a phenomenon it is necessary to research on how to build teacher communities in order to improve teachers' professional development as individuals and as members of a community.

This qualitative case study belongs to the research area of teacher education and it answers the research question "How Can Communities of Teachers Support Professional Development?". The sub-questions addressed in this study are: *How do teachers perceive teacher community work through their own experiences?; What are the main features in the creation and evolution of teacher communities?; and To what extent does teacher community work influence professional development?*

This study is based on data collected during an eight-month observation we conducted in a public school, **C.E.D.I.D. GUILLERMO CANO ISAZA**, located in the 19 zone of Bogotá (Ciudad Bolívar). The participants of the current research were eight teachers from the Language Department at this school; two of

them were selected as the exemplar cases in this study.

As we face a new century, there is an increasing awareness of the relationship between the quality of education given to students and the future quality of life in our country. The National Ministry of Education (MEN) and the Secretaría de Educación Distrital (SED) are concerned about the urgent need to substantially improve students' educational outcomes through the development of basic competencies that must reflect the use of theoretical knowledge as a tool for inquiring, analyzing, problem solving and decision making in students' future lives.

According to the reports of the *Regional Plan of Permanent Teacher and Directive Teacher Training 2000-2001: "Opening Towards New Strategies For Permanent Training"*, provided by the SED, improving the outcomes of the teaching action is one of the axis of the District policy in regards to improving the quality of education. In order to contribute to this goal, the training of in-service teachers of Bogota constitutes one of the most important strategies, given that it is focused on the needs of the school in relation to the field of academic improvement.

As a consequence, projects such as: academic supervisory; impact of Teacher Professional Development Programs (TPDPs) since 1996 to 1999; The Study of

Teacher's Professional Profile in Bogota; The Institutional Training Plan; The Grading Project for Excellence, among others, have been implemented.

As a result, support for restructuring education is taking place through TPDPs. It is done to help teachers and administrators to develop individual skills and strategies for improving one or some aspects of the educational process.

Furthermore, the SED considers computer technology as a crucial aspect in the education of the 21st century. This policy is clearly stated in the regional plan mentioned above which has technology as the key point for pedagogical transformation. Its purposes are mainly: i) to support teaching and learning practices by providing training to handle software as a tool to complement learning. ii) to foster different and permanent training experiences to incorporate computer technology as well as electronic communications as an essential component for educational reform improvement. That is why, among the multiple phenomena occurring at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza, the technology and bilingualism project was observed in order to analyze its development and its impact on professional development.

Taking into account the parameters set in the guidelines from the SED, professional

development programs must focus on developing new definitions and organizational structures establishing collaborative relationships to foster teachers' growth. Such teacher professional development must be enhanced by opportunities to collaborate with others, and to take advantage of what they learn through projecting it, and that way having an impact on the learning community they belong to.

It is precisely this latter aspect which is the core of our research. We studied teacher communities as a source for professional development. In order to study teacher communities we considered it necessary to establish changes for in-service teachers due to working as a community, to determine the main features in the creation and evolution of teacher communities and to identify contributions of teacher community work.

We consider relevant to focus our research on teacher communities for three main reasons: first of all, because communities of teachers may offer strategies for the current educational reform that involve all participants (parents, learners, teachers and administrators) in a permanent process of evolving education. Secondly, we should stress that establishing connections between learning and teaching processes inside and outside the classroom is also a source of professional development; and therefore, a means to encourage students' learning processes and experiences.

In addition, teacher communities can help both students and teachers to improve teaching and learning processes in a more meaningful and practical way. At the same time, they can encourage them to take an active role in the construction of knowledge, and can support teachers in a process of permanent growth.

Finally, we believe that communities of teachers can foster teacher processes by examining thoughtfully and critically their

purposes, roles, and the organization of their teaching practice in relation to the students they teach. They can also help schools to move forward by providing teachers with what they need, new visions of what is possible and new strategies to enhance teaching and learning processes.

This research is significant in two respects. First, it examined the concept of continuous professional development in which teachers are given time to collaborate with colleagues; update knowledge and skills; and are expected to assume much of the responsibility for their own professional growth and development as a critical element in current school reforms. Second, it kept track of a specific group of teachers interested in reaching a common goal together, giving origin to the creation and evolution of a community that emerged in a public school. This is a fact that currently is emerging in the field of education and that can become a new strategy for permanent teacher development. Regardless of the topic, groups provide a good place where teachers can address issues that impact students' achievements as well as their own professional development. We took into account three different theoretical foundations in order to support our research: teacher education, teacher development and teacher communities.

Teacher education. This area is considered an important element to take into account because teacher communities are appearing as a new strategy to be taken into account in teacher education programs. Aparicio de Escorcía et al (1995) offer a complete explanation of aspects such as the aims and constituents of teacher education.

The aims of teacher education, either in pre-service or in-service programs, vary depending on teachers' needs, previous training and experiences and the context where those experiences took place. In fact, teacher education needs to provide educational

programs which meet the demands of actual education in Bogotá. That is why, according to Aparicio de Escorcía et al (1995), language improvement and methodological improvement should constitute nowadays the main aims of any teacher education program. In regards methodological improvement, as said by Aparicio de Escorcía et al (1995), takes place when there is a direct relationship between principle and practice. In addition, it is important that the theoretical principles are related to the need of solving practical problems.

Teacher development Within the field of teacher education, a distinction has been made between *training* and *development*. Following Richards et al (1997), the former deals with basic teaching skills and techniques, typically for novice teachers in a pre-service education program. The latter looks beyond initial training and deals with the ongoing professional development of teachers, something that can be done only by and for oneself. Hixson and Tinzman (1990) present the standards of teacher development in terms of three categories: context, process and content. The first one addresses the organization or culture in which the new learning is implemented; the second one describes the means for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills; and the third one refers to the skills and knowledge that effective educators need to possess or acquire through participation in professional development activities.

The standards for the context aim to improve and sustain the teacher's capacity to understand and apply the elements of a market education system and systemic change principles; anticipate change as a dynamic process; contribute to the plan and design of their own intellectually professional development; increase personal level of involvement in implementing a continuously improving learning community; and use data on student academic achievement as the foundation for selecting professional growth alternatives.

At the same time, these authors claimed that such teacher development propitiates meaningful changes which occur only when those who work in and with schools have the opportunity to develop the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills necessary to translate these new ideas and concepts into meaningful and specific plans for change and to incorporate them into their lives and teaching practices.

Teacher Communities..

Communities are built upon the foundations of a group of people who share a common interest in a topic or area, a particular form of discourse about their phenomena, tools, sense-making approaches for building collaborative knowledge and valued activities (Fulton and Riel 1998). There are other characteristics mentioned by authors like Birchak (1998) such as: commitment; challenging our thinking as educators; and finally, integration of theory and practice. Commitment is quite relevant given that when a group of teachers is committed to improving themselves professionally as well as improving their institution and their teaching practice, results emerge quickly and have an impact on the community in which they appear. From our point of view, working as a community also challenges beliefs and practices we may have as educators because this kind of work plays the role of brainstorming and developing possible plans of action. Thus, teachers are able to think deeply and critically about their teaching. In addition, theory and practice are integrated due to the fact that getting together to work as a community allows for discussion about practical ideas and activities as well as discussing the foundations that underlie these activities. We believe that teachers enrich their set of activities and at the same time they reflect on why they do them in order to develop their own classroom engagements. In relation to this integration,

We perceive that in the evolution of communities, members become differentiated by the amount of power and influence they exert upon the group. We believe that one

important quality is cohesiveness in terms of the tenacity with which a group sticks together or extent to which members would resist giving up membership. Members are more concerned with friendliness, warmth, and members' wellbeing. We observe that communities will usually have three goals: i) the group strives towards a group product or outcome of high quality, arrived at efficiently; ii) the group seeks to win individual commitment to the group product, that is to say, members satisfaction with their outcomes; iii) to maintain the group as a group, to promote harmonious relationships that will be lasting, and to prevent dissolution of the group, the aim here is to develop unity, solidarity, and cohesiveness. Finally, we are convinced that to reach the previous goals it is quite important to accept them, have group orientation, have sane discussion attitude, and not to yield in rigid conformity that stifles innovation and disagreement. In addition, a permissive atmosphere must be developed to increase interaction, communication and better results.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions. Given that the main purpose of this study is to explore and analyze teacher communities as a means to support professional development, the main research question was: *How can communities of teachers support professional development?* The sub-questions addressed were: *how do teachers perceive teacher community work through their own experiences?; what are the main features in the creation and evolution of teacher communities?; and To what extent does teacher community work influence professional development?*

Sampling Frame. In relation to the school, data were mainly collected at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza. This school was selected as the unit of study for two main reasons: first, one of the researchers is currently working in that zone and is involved with the

community. Second, teachers at this school are implementing a project called "Technology and Bilingualism", which requires working as a community.

The C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza is a technical school with about 800 students in each one of its three shifts. Its educational goals are directed to education in technology on three modalities: commerce, industry and sciences. This kind of education attempts to educate people to be able to solve daily problems and to project and develop themselves efficiently in their social environment. This school offers elementary and secondary education.

There were two specific instances at school where data was collected: department meetings and meetings with the members of the project on technology and bilingualism.

Concerning the participants of this case study, the whole population included eight teachers who belong to the Language Department at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza. It is worth noting that two teachers from the whole population constituted a stratified sample for some parts of this study. These two teachers were named Angélica and Valentina throughout this paper.

INSTRUMENTS

We gathered data that provided information on how teacher communities support professional development by means of three instruments: a questionnaire, field notes and interviews. The questionnaire attempted to compare how teachers' beliefs and perceptions of teacher community work change during their work as a community. It was applied twice during the study; first at the beginning and then at the end of the study. Two participants answered it and it provided information on teachers' statements about teacher community work. Our field constituted a direct observation technique. Their main goal was to

keep track of the events that took place during the meetings. They provided information on teacher growth (individual and group growth) that happened as a result of working as a community as well as the influence of this kind of work on professional development. The interviews were an elicitation technique used in order to find out and reflect on the process of creating and developing the teacher community at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza..

PROCEDURE

There were different steps in the collection of data. First, there was a session in which researchers and participant teachers talked about their concepts of teacher community work in order to agree on a definition and characteristics or requirements of this concept. Then, teachers were given a questionnaire to find out their perception; beliefs and interests concerning this kind of work. After that, the main features in the creation and evolution of this teacher community were established. In addition, field notes were taken during the whole process.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND FINDINGS

Teachers' Beliefs And Perceptions About Teacher Community Work. This part addresses the question "How do Teachers Perceive Teacher Community Work Through Their Own experiences?". The main purpose of this question was to compare how teachers' beliefs and perceptions about teacher community work have changed so far as a result of working as a community. The data collected was provided by the two case studies: Angélica and Valentina.

Angélica's Case. Angélica had a very clear idea of what working as a community means, in fact, her beliefs and perceptions have been growing as her experience in the teacher community has evolved. She states that working as a community implies that participants

have clear and common goals because it allows them to know exactly where they are going and how to reach their goals. In addition, she thinks that discussion of topics and getting feedback about work and personal development are other aspects that teacher communities facilitate, because you get more opinions and points of view regarding the topic under investigation or being discussed. Angélica visualizes different types of benefits provided by working as a community. These benefits include professional development, she thinks that benefits are possible given that working as a community, participants are able to transform and change problematic situations of interest and concern among teachers from the community. Finally, an important fact that Angélica has realized through her experience of working as a community is that this kind of work creates a sense of belonging.

Valentina's Case. During working as a community, Valentina showed a more mature perception about teacher community work. At the beginning, she perceived teacher community work as informal meetings where participants had the opportunity of sharing ideas, opinions, learning from others, receiving support and feedback to get better results. Now she thinks that time has given teachers the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging so that they feel able to adapt themselves to the project developed at school.

Thus, her experience and perception of the community have now changed. She stated that organization, harmony, respect and enjoyment were quite important elements for teacher community work to take place. She considers that teacher collaborative work must be supported on the foundations of commitment, responsibility, strong interest and respect for others' ideas and capacities. Valentina also claims that she has benefited from the advantages of being part of the community, something that she has not got before because she had not had any experiences of working as

a community. She reports having worked as a team, an activity that assign responsibilities to the different members of the group, but it does not imply change or growth on the participants' part.

THE TEACHER COMMUNITY AT C.E.D.I.D. GUILLERMO CANO ISAZA

The Creation of the Teacher Community. The teacher community we observed for eight months was created as a result of the development of two academic projects: the Literacy Project and the Technology and Bilingualism project. The literacy project was based on the generally teachers' complaint about the poor competency of the students when reading and writing. Teachers at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza had the belief that the Language Department, more specifically the Spanish class, has the responsibility of initiating, developing, and/or improving the literacy process of students. However, in a staff meeting, the teachers from the language department made their colleagues realize that they were responsible for leading a literacy project, but they were not the only ones responsible of teaching students how to read and write. Thus, teachers from the languages department took the responsibility of elaborating a literacy project which is expected to be developed by all teachers and in all content areas. The second academic project that contributed to the creation of the community we observed was *the Technology and Bilingualism Project*. It began with the participation of one of the teachers from the school in "The National Project of Technology and Bilingualism - Agreement MEN - ICETEX, 1998" which took place in Canada and the United States. When she came back to Colombia, she shared their experiences. This sharing had such a great impact on teachers at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza that they decided to continue working as a community in order to improve their teaching

practice and at the same time the teaching and learning process. Thus, bilingualism meetings began to take place at the school.

The Language department meeting and bilingualism meeting provided good opportunities to reflect on literacy issues, the management of technology and teachers' proficiency in the foreign language. These reflections led teachers to agree on working together to support the development of both languages, Spanish and English. At this point, the two projects were joined and the Language Department began to work collaboratively.

Characteristics in the creation and evolution of the community. Several characteristics were present in the creation and evolution of this teacher community. These characteristics are: sharing an interest on a topic, task, or problem; commitment; developing autonomy; coming to a consensus; making knowledge social; learning by means of collaboration; changing; reflecting; playing different roles.

Another characteristic of the development of a teacher community is the changes and transformations that take place when working as a community. The teacher community at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza led teachers to change some of their beliefs and practices as a result of sharing their thoughts and practices about teaching and having feedback about them. In that way, working as a community gave teachers the chance to integrate theory and practice in the sense of sharing practical ideas and activities as well as discussing the theoretical foundations that underlie those activities.

During the process of the creation and evolution of this community two different kinds of participants were present: insiders and outsiders. By insiders we mean those participants (teachers, students and people from the school staff) who constitute the educational community at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza. They played two different roles during the

development of this study: agents of change and other teacher participants.

Richards and Lockhart (1994) argue that a role is defined as the part taken by a participant in specific contexts and situations. It implies the involvement of different kinds of work and different levels of responsibility; different kinds of relationships and different patterns of interaction and communication; and specially different power relationships. Thus, because of the nature of the community it was clearly seen that a shared leadership has taken place.

In the process of building up the community, the two leaders showed tenacity, persistence, and good handling of rejection to maintain the interest and motivation of the participants. Angélica and Valentina were the initiators and the leaders of the process of building up this community. Only gradually, they become aware of basic processes that their diverse efforts have barely begun to make clear, they have increased their awareness of details and sequences, they have learned more from careful research, they have built up their skills to encourage the process in people, they have made it the central focus of their encouragement; and therefore, they gave social identity to their field.

By outsiders, we refer to the researchers and in general to people who do not directly belong to the community of C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza. We, as researchers, had two main roles: observers and participants. The first role implied stepping back from the community process and observing its evolution. The second role allowed us to join their activities and state our opinions about them. Our roles had an evolution too, at the beginning we only played the role of observers. Later, one of us played the role of the observer and the other assumed the role of a participant. However, when we became involved in the community we had to play both roles, observers and participants at the same time. In addition, we also played the role

of facilitators in the process of teacher growth given the fact that our presence was a kind of motivation to encourage teachers to practice English.

INFLUENCE OF TEACHER COMMUNITY WORK

Staff Development. It takes place as a social process in which teachers have become more competent to live with and have gained some control over specific aspects of their teaching practice in order to better certain problematic situations. According to Biddle and Biddle (1965), staff development, is a group method for expediting personality growth, which can occur when a group of people work together to serve their growing concept of the good of all. It involves cooperative study, group decisions, collective actions, and joint evaluation that leads to continuing action.

By assuming specific roles within a community, this teacher community gained in efficiency because of a division of labor, although there were continuous shifts in the patterns of who performs what. Nevertheless, the responsibility for the process rested upon two people who became community developers, or encouragers or agents of change. As mentioned before we have addressed the two promoters of the teacher community at C.E.D.I.D. GUILLERMO CANO ISAZA as agents of change.

Personal Development. Both agents of change have developed abilities to think quickly. In other words, they have developed two thinking processes: one is to follow closely and in detail what is being said, and the other is to think ahead of the group; this means anticipating questions in order to move forward to the discussion. Besides that, both Angélica and Valentina have gained clear insight into what others say, what it means, what it implies and perhaps why it was expressed in one way rather than another. There

are other abilities that these two teachers have developed such as objectivity, self control, sense of humor, and firmness among others.

Curriculum Development. The previous curriculum was focused on presenting generalities such as achievement, achievement indicators, and topics. Curriculum development goes further, it has to do with the principles and procedures for the planning, delivery, management and assessment of teaching and learning. Curriculum development processes include needs analysis, goals, syllabus design, methodology, testing, and evaluation.

The new curriculum was built upon the needs of the students. In order to establish and prioritize such needs, these teachers applied a survey to a sample population of students to confirm, what they have been observing through their experience in their teaching practices, that students had very poor competence in literacy. Their curriculum now presents a clearly defined methodological approach. The approach includes the kind of instruction that will be required to achieve the goals of the program. It evolves around the dynamics of the teaching process itself. This is characterized with the activities, tasks, and learning experiences selected by them in order to achieve learning and how these are within the teaching/learning process.

Finally, they took into account testing and evaluation, which have a central role in their curriculum development, since they are a component of both needs assessment and evaluation, and have consequences for design and delivery of different activities such department projects, updating activities, and pedagogical proposals among others.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results gathered through the observation of the teacher community at C.E.D.I.D Guillermo Cano Isaza, and taking into account the research questions of this study, it can be concluded that teacher communities are in fact a means to support professional development. The findings, which emerged as a result of answering each one of the research sub-questions, support and confirm this statement.

In regards to the first sub-question of the current research, "*How do teachers perceive teacher community work through their own experiences?*", the two case studies showed evidence of having strengthened perceptions of community work through the experience faced in their community. One of the aspects that has changed concerns the reasons that led teachers to work as a community. In the beginning, teachers worked together because it was a mandatory policy of the school; for instance, the organization of Language Day. During the process of working together, teachers became committed with their learning community and with themselves.

They agreed that having common goals is crucial for working as a community, and that respectful discussions and academic debates enrich their personal as well as their professional development. But above all, collaborative work must be supported by an environment of harmony, enjoyment, commitment, responsibility, strong interest and respect for others ideas and capacities, and partnership. Therefore, they began to work voluntarily and with willingness to improve the teaching and learning practices as well as the school

Another aspect that has changed is the perception of community work. Before working together, teachers assumed it as sharing responsibilities in order to carry out a task. However, their experiences in the community made them realize the importance of learning from others and getting to change in the process.

Concerning the second sub-question, "*what are the main features in the creation and evolution of teacher communities?*", different characteristics emerged as the result

of the observation done to the teacher community at C.E.D.I.D. Guillermo Cano Isaza. They are: sharing an interest on a topic, task, or problem; commitment; developing autonomy; coming to a consensus; making knowledge social; learning BY means of collaboration; changing; reflecting; playing different roles

In relation to the third sub-question, "*To what extent does teacher community work influence professional development?*", it was found that professional development has taken place at three levels: staff development, personal development and curriculum development. Regarding the first two, development has been evident in knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness. In relation to the third, more structured and defined curriculum has been built up taking into account the experience within the community.

In general terms, teacher communities support professional development in the sense that they allow participants to renew themselves and their profession to better serve the school as well as the students. This renewal is done by improving the relationship with students, colleagues, and the learning community in general; employing different tools and techniques; restating their rights and responsibilities; redesigning the form and the content of the curriculum; establishing what standards to set and how to assess whether they are being met; continuing their preparation as teachers and assuming their ongoing professional development; and finally, improving the very structure of the school.

In addition, teacher communities allow teachers to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly; interpret learners' statements and actions and shape productive experiences; understand differences that arise from culture, family experiences, develop intelligence and approaches to learning; know about curriculum resources and technologies to connect their students with sources of information and knowledge that allow them to explore, acquire and synthesize information; and frame and solve problems; know collaboration, how to structure interactions among students, other colleagues and parents.

Finally, teacher communities become good spaces for teachers to acquire knowledge and develop a practice different from what teachers experience through reading and talking about new pedagogical ideas. Thus, teachers learn best by studying, doing and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers, by looking closely at students and their work and by sharing what they see. As a consequence, this teacher development can not take place in classrooms which are not connected

with knowledge and practice given that knowledge is the basis for practice and for decisions that are made with respect for the unique needs of the community.

Working as a community constitutes a continuous and permanent process in which participants got committed and from which they were benefited. This leads to useful division of responsibilities as well as getting insights from others.

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