

Developing a Community of Teacher Learning in a Preschool: The Role of the Director

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of a preschool director in developing a learning community among teachers. We assumed a qualitative perspective to describe the culture in a preschool and explore the means by which the director built a community of practical learning among novice teachers. This three-month study at a preschool included the observation of participants, interviews, videotaping, and a review of teacher journals. The data shows that the administrator was committed to a child-centered learning environment and therefore created conversation time using a variety of approaches to communication including formal communication (weekly meetings, book studies and teacher journals) and informal sharing (frequently random sharing) to foster a community of learning. This study made a number of important discoveries. First, wider social engagements provide greater opportunities to satisfy the learning needs of various teachers. Second, the director's non-threatening leadership enhanced the opportunities for professional discussion among teachers and the director over time. Third, a pattern of interaction demonstrated that the teachers were emerging as a community capable of solving practical problems. Fourth, teachers learn to adapt to the culture of the particular school in which they teach through interactions within a learning community. This study suggests that consistent communication among teachers and administrators is essential for maintaining school values, problem-solving and developing shared knowledge and practices.

Key words: community of practice, educational leadership, early childhood education, teacher learning, learning community

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Introduction

There have been many propositions for improving teacher learning, including higher standards for entry into the field, longer induction programs, and more extensive beginning teacher mentoring. These approaches can strengthen novice teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills as they begin their careers. They do not, however, address the need for ongoing learning throughout a teacher's career as they face a rapidly changing global environment. Some researchers have suggested that building schools as learning organizations and creating professional communities can enhance teachers' sense of professionalism and students' learning (Chao, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Cobb & Bullmaster, 1998; Gordon, 2004; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Wang, 2007). Furthermore, some authors claim that such communities are necessary for authentic and sustained school improvement (Chang & Wang, 2010; Louis, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994, Tsai, 2004) Although scholars and practitioners have offered varying approaches to enhance teacher's learning, most agree that teachers need to be consistently involved in the processes of collaborative inquiry, decision making, planning and implementation (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman, 1995; Little, 2003; Rosenholtz, 1986; Snow-Gerono, 2005). However, the model of schooling that persists in most countries tends to isolate teachers and provides little time and few structures for ongoing communication and significant collaboration.

In recent years more attention has been given to developing learning communities within schools, with support often being provided by an external group. (Chrispeels, Andrews & Gonzalez, 2007; Dooner, Mandzuk, Clifton, 2008; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991) It is difficult to predict whether these communities will be sustained after the external support ends. An important avenue for further research is to explore schools in which the principal and teachers may be naturally evolving as a learning community without an outside mandate. Only a few case studies have observed and documented schools that seem to have developed as a

learning community in an elementary school (Snyder, Lieberman, Macdonald & Goodwin, 1992), a middle school (Olsen & Chrispeels, 2009) and a high school (Talbert, 1993). Similar to other studies of successful school reform (Chrispeels, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) these researchers found that the role of principal/director was significant in creating and sustaining a school-wide community. These leaders have a particular educational philosophy (i.e., learner-centered) and guide teachers in nontraditional ways (i.e., with flexibility and through collaboration). Teachers, in return, are more willing to extend the boundaries of their traditional role and to view the school as a whole, emphasizing more collaboration and social engagement.

Given the critical role of the school leader and the increasing evidence that professional learning communities can support teacher and student learning (Sergiovanni, 2000, 2002), yet there has been very limited research examining the dynamic interactions between the administrator and teachers in early childhood education in Taiwan. This study explores how a director of one preschool built a shared vision with teachers and fostering social and intellectual engagement to enhance teacher professional learning. The first author of this study had worked with the director for one year as a beginning teacher at the previous preschool. The job that the director has done in early childhood education and adult education (including teacher training and parental involvement) has been very impressive. Rather than looked at educational accomplishments of a director or a particular preschool, we focus on how this school evolved as a learning community and what opportunities were created to enhance teachers' learning. To explore this process, the study was guided by the following specific questions:

1. In what ways did the director's conceptions of her role and pre-school philosophy shape and influence her actions?
2. What kinds of social engagements did the director and the teachers find productive in supporting their learning?
3. What patterns of interaction were created for teacher learning in the preschool?

Theoretical Framework

This study used the perspectives of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and organizational learning (Huber, 1991) to explore and interpret the role of a preschool director in developing a community of practice to support teacher learning in this school.

Communities of practice are defined as self-organizing, evolving entities that have their own emergent organizational structure and norms of behavior (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schlager & Fusco, 2003). On his website, Wenger (2006) expands on this early definition suggesting communities of practice “are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. The ideas of common concern and regular interaction take into account the importance of participation in an activity and in generating shared meaning from the activity as essential to learning. Originally, the term “communities of practice” was used to describe a mode of social learning based on five apprenticeship cases (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It explained the process of newcomers learning from old-timers (experts) through participating in social activities within a community. Apprenticeship was usually used to explain the relationship between a student/novice and a master. A key component of apprenticeship is that learning occurs through the collaborative relationship between the learner and one who is more knowledgeable and capable (Vygotsky, 1978). The novice’s learning begins by observing the master’s performance in a natural context. Through dialogue and practice, the novice applies the knowledge and skills observed and learned. Later, Wenger (1998) extended the concept of communities of practice and applied it to a variety of organizational settings. He believed that informal apprenticeships and learning systems existed in a community of practice; therefore, learning is not limited to a novice and a master. It can be peer-to-peer and involve multiple members of the organization.

Most teacher education programs recognize the need for pre-service teachers to learn in situ with a master teacher and place these novices in schools for a

practicum as part of their preparation (Putnam & Borko, 2000). These novices are expected to transfer the teaching theory to practice by observing the expert's teaching and receiving appropriate assistance in problem solving as they apply their learning in practice under the guidance of a master teacher.

This study explores the relationship of a master and beginning teachers in a slightly different context. The teachers in the pre-school are not pre-service teachers, but rather fully employed teachers who nevertheless are in the early stages of their teaching careers. Thus the concept of apprenticeship in a community (i.e., a group of novices learning from a master in the workplace) seems to fit. Furthermore, recent research found that communities of practice in schools (e.g., grade level or department teams/communities) can provide powerful sites for learning for teachers (Gallucci, 2003; Kimble, Hildreth & Bourdon, 2008). These natural collectives of teachers provide opportunities to collaborate, develop new knowledge, learn about new resources, and evolve into communities of practice. However, not every group represents a community of practice. To help people better understand the concept of community of practice, Wenger listed three crucial characteristics:

1. The domain: a community of practice does not just mean a group of people. Community members are distinguished from other people because they have a commitment and shared competence in the domain. However, this domain does not have to be recognized as "expertise" by an outsider for the community to exist.
2. The community: a group of people is not a community of practice unless its members are engaged in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information.
3. The practice: a community of practice also requires actions—and members are a community of practitioners. Through conversation, community members develop a set of stories that become a shared repertoire for the practice.

In this study, these characteristics will be applied as the criteria to explore the ways the preschool reflected attributes of a community of practice.

The idea of community of practice was first applied to educational settings in teacher training and in facilitating administrators' access to colleagues (Wenger, 2006). Scholars and leaders view schools as organization that face new learning challenges and thus expect new learning by teachers. As Hubbard, Mehan & Stein (2006) assert, reform needs to be viewed as learning. This new learning may require not just the acquisition of new knowledge and skills but also changing beliefs that underlie current practices. Changing teachers' theories of learning results in a deeper transformation and is more time consuming (Wenger, 2006). Therefore, leaders need to understand how to create conditions for a community of practice and how to sustain learning among teachers.

Gallucci (2003) points out that communities of practice are not equal to more formal and time-limited entities such as task forces or teams. When teams of teachers work to accomplish a particular task, "they may or may not become communities of practice—entities in which teachers negotiate the meaning of their everyday work through their learning and identification with a community of other teachers" (p. 15). Therefore, the relationships and interests that members build in their group define their community over time. Time and institutional structures, however, often emerge as the biggest barriers to building communities of practice. Communities of practice are not formed from the volunteer efforts of some teachers (Gallucci, 2003). They are made possible when schools recognize their needs and arrange activities in their schedules for collaborative planning, providing time for teachers to interact, engage in joint work, and build shared knowledge (Chrispeels, Andrews & Gonzalez, 2007; Lin, 2008; Little, 1993).

Huber's theory (1991) of organizational learning provides a way to understand how knowledge is distributed and learned by members within a community. He points out that the process of distributing information can lead an organization to change its behaviors. According to Huber, there are four stages of organizational learning processes:

1. Knowledge acquisition: organizations acquire new knowledge (e.g., book studies, studying similar organizations, and learning from each other).

2. Information distribution: organization members share information throughout the entire organization. Dissemination occurs when a single source shares information, when collegial relationships foster information exchange, or by a combination of the two. New information may be shared from the top and spread throughout the organization over time.
3. Information interpretation: organizational learning then involves interpretation of the learned information. The members will choose the useful information and discard obsolete and misleading knowledge. This may result in a change in organizational norms, behaviors, and routines.
4. Organizational memory: the final stage occurs when the organization stores new learning in organizational memory. The new learning becomes a part of the organization's culture and is transmitted to new members through organizational norms.

These four stages illustrate how organizational learning can occur through information distribution and interpretation. New organizational norms are constructed through this process and become instantiated as new organizational memory. Thus a community of practice can be viewed as a structure for learning and Huber's theory as the process by which learning occurs in the community. This study will use these two theoretical lenses to explore how the director of the pre-school interacted with the teachers to support their learning and build a community of practice.

Methods

This research used a qualitative perspective as a logic of inquiry (Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2000) to describe the culture of the preschool being studied. The study focused on: who initiates the contact, when, where, how, under what conditions, for what purpose, and with what outcome. To answer these questions, this study adopted methods of participant-observation, interviewing, audiotaping, videotaping, fieldnotes from the observations and teacher journals. The first author

observed the preschool daily for three months from January to March 2000, which covered the end of one semester and beginning of another. The observations took place from 9:00 AM to 5:30 PM. The observations traced the director and each teacher individually for several days at the beginning of the data collection. Observations included: exploring and documenting the daily work of the director and the teachers, the preschool's daily schedule, the interaction patterns between the teachers and the director, and the content and nature of their dialogue.

Gaining Field Entry and Observational Approach

Upon entering Seed Preschool, Director Chen introduced me (the first author) to the teachers in the weekly meeting and to the parents through the weekly letter. She explained the purpose of the study and asked the teachers to accept me as a part of their school life. She also encouraged me to participate in their daily school activities, which placed me in a participant observer role (Corsaro, 1985; Spradley, 1980). The research began primarily as an observational study, but as trust and familiarity were gained with the teachers, I was able to also study the school through more active participation.

The first step of data collection was to observe each teacher's classroom: the schedule, interactions, and classroom activities. During the following semester, as Director Chen and the teachers became comfortable with the data collection strategies including audiotaping and videotaping, I found that teachers talked to each other naturally—even in the presence of the tape recorder. In this phase, the teachers viewed me as a participant as well as a researcher, which allowed me to gain firsthand experience of Director Chen's approach and teacher responses.

Setting

The study was conducted in Seed Preschool, a private preschool, in Tainan, Taiwan. The director's approach emphasized positive home-school relations and

friendly interactions between adults and children. This developmental approach was contrary to the teacher-centered academic instructional approach in several other private preschools, which stressed formal teaching of writing, math and English instruction.

Seed Preschool had three classrooms, five teachers, and 46 students spanning age three to five. Two classrooms were for children aged four to five and the third was for three year-olds. The parents' background was middle class. Teachers at Seed were relatively young and inexperienced, making it an interesting site to study and to learn how Director Chen intended to provide professional support in line with her philosophy.

Participants

The primary participants included the director and five teachers. Director Chen was a preschool teacher for nine years before becoming a director. After one year as a director in Taipei, she took a 6-year break to look after her children. She was then offered a director's position in Tainan. The researcher worked with Director Chen in this preschool as a beginning teacher for one year. Although this preschool was operating profitably, the managers disagreed with her approach and thought she was spending too much money on students and teachers, prompting her to leave. Later that year, Chen was asked to be the director of Seed Preschool, which had been recently established by parents who were familiar with her efforts in her previous preschool leadership role and approved of her educational philosophy.

There were five teachers in Seed Preschool, HY, RB, CF, LJ and EL. Two of them were more experienced teachers. They majored in early childhood education for 3 years in a vocational high school, followed by 2 years in a college and another 3 years of night school, before becoming a qualified teacher. The other three teachers were new teachers. They graduated from universities and take an exam to enter a teacher education program which majors in early childhood education.

Table 1.

Name	Age	Occupational History	Class for this year
H.Y.	28	Traditional preschool 4 years	Age: 4-5
		Seed Preschool: 3rd year	Number: 15
R.B.	26	Traditional preschool: 2 years	Administrative
		Seed Preschool: 3rd year	teacher
C.F.	27	Student teacher: 1 year	Age: 4-5
		Seed Preschool: 2nd year	Number: 15
E.L.	27	Student teacher: 1 year	Age: 3
		Seed Preschool: 1st year	Number: 16
			Partner: LJ
L.J.	29	Student teacher: 1 year	Age: 3
		Seed Preschool: 1st year	Number: 16
			Partner: EL

Demographics, years of teaching and current teaching level of study participants.

Data Sources and Collection

The primary data sources for this study included interviews with the director and the teachers, videotapes of weekly meetings, audiotapes of conversations between the director and the teachers, field notes from observations, and teacher journals.

To answer the first question, in what ways did the director's conceptions of her role and pre-school philosophy shape and influence her actions? The first author interviewed the director and the teachers. Fieldnotes from observations of their daily work was an important data source as well.

Through actively participated in the activities of the preschool, this study was able to collect data for the second question, what kinds of social engagements did the director and the teachers find productive in supporting their learning? The data sources included interviews, videotapes and fieldnotes.

Through writing fieldnotes daily, the first author was able to capture the pattern of interaction of the preschool. Thus, this study answers the third question, what patterns of interaction were created for teacher learning in the preschool?

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed inductively; using the content analysis of open-ended data: the concept book approach (Mostyn, 1985). All the interview tapes were transcribed and repeatedly reviewed to identify patterns of interaction and establish categories and themes. In addition, the transcripts were reviewed using the conceptual lenses of community of practice and organizational learning. Through this process, the main themes and categories of data emerged.

Research Results

Parents who supported Director Chen’s educational philosophy worked cohesively to establish the Seed Preschool. This collaboration helped them become comfortable in allowing Director Chen’s role and philosophy to shape the culture of Seed Preschool. The data, as will be shown, suggest that teachers were learning to adopt the school culture through various interactions with the director. To understand how and what the teachers had access to learn, we first explore the role and philosophy of the director and teachers’ responses to it. Second, we describe how the different social engagements between director and teachers provided productive contexts for teacher learning. Third, we present the pattern of interactions and discourse observed in the preschool, followed by exploring the tension that arose in creating a community of practice given the natural hierarchy that exists between a director and teachers.

Director's Role and Philosophy

When interviewing Director Chen, she revealed that her religious beliefs, coupled with her upbringing and experience as a kindergarten/preschool teacher had formed her educational philosophy—life education. This ultimately shaped her approach to leadership in the founding of Seed Preschool.

Life education

Unlike the majority of people in Taiwan, Director Chen is a Christian. She stated that her religious beliefs gave her an understanding of people's inner needs, which if met, would greatly enhance learning potential and progress. She utilized information about personal growth and learning that she obtained from her church including magazines, books, audio and videotapes. She also shared this information with teachers and parents, emphasizing that life education was the core of her educational philosophy.

I feel life education is more important, because it involves many things. This is what we lack in Taiwan's curriculum. If you can satisfy a child's inner needs, he will become a happy person. They know themselves well and feel safe...Thus, children will be happy their whole life. Therefore, I would prefer to spend time to talk to parents and to make things clear (01/12/00).

Based on this belief, the director expended time and effort in adult education with teachers and parents. She believed that the learning of adults could enhance children's learning and development in early childhood. Children appeared to be sensitive, as exemplified in their ability to sense when adults were relaxed or unhappy. Hence, the personality and approach of a teacher was very important, as it could affect the children under her care.

For example, HY, as a result of her previous experiences in a traditional

preschool, was strict with the children and had a hard time adapting to this particular school's culture in the first two years. She explained:

Seeing [that] Director Chen enjoyed so much intimacy with the children, I felt I had a very long way to go to develop the same relationship (01/08/00).

In the second year, HY was teaching with Miss Chang, whose teaching style was similar to Director Chen's philosophy. Through daily observations of her colleague's teaching, HY gradually learned how to build a close relationship with children. She said,

Director Chen kept telling me that Miss Chang's teaching was more relaxing. I could feel it when we were teaching in the class. I liked it and [was] willing to learn from her. (01/08/00)

Supporting positive adult and children interaction was the director's goal. As the teachers worked they fulfill their duties as educators and also engaged in self-reflection about their teaching. According to the director, they needed to understand how their personality or character could influence their interactions with children both in and out of the classroom. Through their reflections, the teachers could find their strengths and identify areas for improvement.

According to Director Chen, the child should be the focus of early childhood education; i.e., teachers should put more emphasis on a child's life and respect each child's individuality rather than emphasizing a teaching strategy. Observations revealed that Chen practiced her philosophy in her daily life and exemplified through actions what she meant by her child-centered educational philosophy. The teachers recognized this influence, as reflected in the comment of LJ.

The attitude, the dialogue between the director and the child is very natural. Unknowingly, I have learned this from her in daily life. It's great! Director Chen is very good in this. Although she is a director,

she can get along well with children and talk to children in their language naturally. Many directors cannot do this (03/10/00).

Chen observed new teachers' interactions with children very carefully. She usually engaged in conversation—after the school's dismissal—with the teacher who she felt had an inappropriate attitude toward the students. The children's wellbeing was an important factor in her decision on hiring a prospective teacher. She revealed:

I focus on if a teacher can respect children, get along well with children and see the value of a human life. I feel that teaching skills and curriculum are not so important. A teacher's personality has more influences on the future of a child. If a teacher can love and have concern about a child's life, I can nurture her to become a more experienced and skillful teacher... If they are willing to learn and have the attitude, I can teach them (01/12/00).

This demonstrates that life education and a child-centered approach are blended together in the director's beliefs. In Seed Preschool, the children's wellbeing was the most important factor that influenced the director when making decisions. For example, she assigned educators to teach in different classrooms according to their personality before considering the teachers' preferences. Compared to adults, Chen believed, children were vulnerable and needed to be protected. Teachers were adults, according to Chen, and could therefore adapt to their environment.

When asked how she ensured that teachers were continually learning, she emphasized the importance of open-mindedness. Chen explained that if you can really make yourself completely open, the challenges from the classroom would never cease to exist. Teachers, she said, keep learning because they can continually learn in interacting with parents and children. For example, she said:

When teachers developed a new teaching topic in the classroom, they should not repeat their previous experiences. You would have better ideas to share with children because, when you are facing different children, you will have different interactions from previous ones and bring out different results (01/12/00).

Simply put, Director Chen encouraged teachers not to be constrained by the school environment or by their previous experiences, but rather, to create new possibilities and ideas in teaching and learning. She encouraged her staff to have an open mind and promoted learning (as will be explored later) through teacher selected book discussions.

Life education represented new knowledge for the teachers in Seed Preschool. How to help teachers learn and apply this child-centered idea to their everyday teaching suggests a non-traditional leadership. The way in which the director performed her leadership role appeared to be crucial to the teachers' learning and reflected how this knowledge was obtained and applied in daily teaching.

Non-threatening hierarchy

Director Chen viewed her role as sharing an experience with the teachers. She believed there should be no hierarchy between herself and her staff; and as the director, de-emphasized her hierarchical position. She said:

It is not a big deal to be a director. In fact, I am just more fortunate than others to be in a better environment with opportunities to learn. I am just sharing my experiences with teachers...

Do not take me as a director. I am just passing my knowledge and experiences onto new teachers. (01/12/00)

CF talked about how she felt about Director Chen's role and agreed that there was less hierarchy at Seed Preschool. She felt frustrated when she was a

student teacher in another preschool because there was limited interaction with the director and she did not know how she performed in her prior job or how to improve her effectiveness as a teacher. Once she became a teacher at Seed, she asked for Director Chen's advice on her teaching methods. She felt that having an expert who understood her challenges and could provide her with suggestions was extremely helpful.

Director Chen actively sought to minimize hierarchy by continually reminding the faculty that they should not take things personally when given constructive criticism. In fact, Chen often encouraged her staff to approach her with suggestions and feedback. In an interview Director Chen said:

Everyone is an individual human being; sometimes your experiences have not achieved certain levels. Now, someone can talk and discuss with you when you have problems. You should appreciate this opportunity. (01/12/00)

Thus, the director tried to create an open and honest atmosphere at the work site for the Seed Preschool faculty. She also encouraged the staff to enter each other's classrooms to observe colleagues and students. Chen felt that this would enable teachers to better understand the obstacles and needs of the school members. Similarly, it would also help establish a better rapport between the administrators and the teachers.

In the interviews, the teachers agreed that Director Chen was someone who could both listen and discuss questions and issues with her faculty. Teachers also mentioned, however, that the director had her own strong opinions on some issues. Teachers' perception of this duality of the director's openness and her clear, strongly held educational philosophy was reflected in comments by all the staff. For example, CF said:

There is no problem in opportunities of communication, but Director Chen has her strong opinions. Although she says that's just her opinion...her

decision is still negotiable. After giving her some negative feedback, she will have second thoughts and might change her decisions. (03/10/00)

HY echoed this perception:

Director Chen tries to create an atmosphere so that the teachers are able to talk to her about everything. Therefore, she can accept whatever things you want to say to her...I usually accept her suggestions for two reasons. First, her suggestions usually are rather reasonable. Second, she is the director. (03/14/00)

RB primarily stressed her comfort in communicating with the Director. “I feel she has great respect for the teachers. I feel very good while communicating with her.” (03/17/00)

Overall, teachers did not feel constrained by Director Chen’s leadership, with the exception of EL, who was accustomed to working independently without administrators intervening. She thought that the director gave her too many suggestions, which she said made her start second-guessing what Director Chen would approve of before she did her work. She also reported that this dynamic made her feel less confident in her teaching. The feelings of EL toward Director Chen’s suggestions seemed to be ambivalent. On the one hand, EL expressed that teachers should learn from their experiences and mistakes. On the other hand, EL did not want to teach in ways that would harm children. In essence she wanted to learn from her mistakes, but she did not want to make mistakes and saw the value of teachers receiving suggestions from the director. She liked the fact that the director provided her faculty with suggestions for improving their teaching, but also felt distress when the director gave her suggestions. When interviewed again in March after she had been working with Director Chen for seven months, EL’s attitude seemed to have shifted. She felt that she was a part of the school community and that she could make her own decisions after considering the

director's suggestions. Thus, the guidance provided was better received. By the second semester of my observations and interview data indicated that more teachers were comfortable with the director's suggestions and feedback.

Director Chen explained that when there was a disagreement between the teachers and her, she would insist on what was best for the students, which is why the teachers felt she was very opinionated. Because of her strong commitment to the children, the director did not feel the need to change this aspect of her leadership style even when she imposed her view on the teachers.

Although the teachers all agreed that Director Chen tried to limit hierarchy and promote equity and community, they still viewed her as the director—a position that involved her having authority over them. Nevertheless, the teachers still felt comfortable with the director's leadership and generally saw her as working with them. We could conclude that the “no hierarchy” that Director Chen was promoting was a non-threatening hierarchy. As Verma (2010) has pointed out, the community of practice literature suggests an equality of relationships and does not address differentials in power that exist between a director and staff. The findings of this study suggest, however, that the role of leader is key in creating conditions that foster the development of a community of practice.

The data also showed that when the teachers had higher levels of participation in the preschool, they were more confident in their teaching and decision-making. As Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out “the development of identity is central to the careers of newcomers in communities of practice and thus fundamental to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 115). Newcomers move from periphery to full participation eventually through learning in the community of practice. They develop their identity in and with the community. At Seed this seemed to occur through a rich social dynamic that consisted of active communication and developing patterns of interaction.

Ways of Communicating and Learning Opportunities

Observations indicated that these preschool teachers were actively engaged in conversations with their colleagues about their students. Through daily informal conversations, the staff felt that they could learn from one another while gaining a sense of belonging to the school’s community. Community building was achieved by sharing classroom experiences and using different methods of communication, including informal ways such as individual conversations and formally through teacher journals, weekly meetings and the teachers taking turns leading book discussions.

The conversations among director, teachers and children occurred frequently with students being the center of conversation. Director Chen and the teachers knew each child well, including an understanding of their personality and family background through weekly meetings, informal conversations with parents, and daily observations in the preschool. The teachers also shared examples of children’s dialogue with each other when they met on the playground, lunchroom or in weekly meetings as a way to gain insights into the child’s thinking and development. These findings suggest a rich web of interaction that promoted information acquisition and distribution, which Huber identified as essential for organizational learning.

The whole school community had various opportunities to become better acquainted with each other (e.g., lunch break, Children’s Theater and outdoor activities). These arrangements enabled a high level of social interaction. The director chose regularly to have lunch with teachers and children. During lunchtime, she observed the interactions between the teachers and students. Frequently after lunch she also talked and read storybooks to the children. Through these multiple venues, members of Seed Preschool community interacted over time. They shaped and were shaped by daily communication, which created shared understanding and common knowledge within the community.

Director Chen observed and mentored teachers in their daily routines. There

were several ways for her to come to understand the teachers' needs including: daily observation, individual conversations, teacher's journals, and weekly meetings where teachers often took turns leading a book discussion. These ways of communication provided opportunities for the director to observe and talk to the teachers and assist them based on their needs.

Director Chen explained how she found out about the teachers' learning progress and their different learning needs.

*How could you not know their learning needs and progress if you live with them everyday in the preschool? From leading a book discussion, you can find that the content that the teachers present in the discussion was varied. For example, the book *The Models of Preschool Teachers* that CF chose last time is very good. The point that she brought out in the discussion is very good, too. That is what I would like to share with the teachers, too. However, the book that HY shared with us is *Froebel* and another one I forgot the name of the book, they are not so suited to our teaching culture. As for EL, the book she shared this week is good, but she was very nervous. It looked like she wanted to introduce the whole in a limited time. You can tell she is still a novice. CF can pull out the important theme that she can connect to and share with everyone, however, the way that EL did this was to summarize the whole. It sounds like a reading report in college, not a sharing. You still need to listen to it instead of telling her how to do it. From leading a book discussion, you can tell the teachers' personal growth in early childhood education. (01/18/00)*

As this passage shows, the book discussions gave the teachers an opportunity to acquire professional knowledge and provided Director Chen with an opportunity to observe the progress of the teachers' learning and professional development.

The various means of communication served different purposes for each individual teacher's learning process. The teacher could choose her own

appropriate way to communicate with the director; however, the director felt that the best way to communicate with the teachers was through individual conversation. She believed that she could get her points across more quickly and clearly by speaking with the teacher directly. In contrast, she thought the function of weekly meetings was to provide the school with a shared goal. These meetings were an opportunity for open discussion on public matters and current issues. Another form of communication was the teacher journal, which Director Chen thought was limited because she could not respond to the teacher's questions quickly and effectively. Nevertheless she thought that writing in the journal was necessary to promote teachers' self-reflection. She emphasized that teachers should do self-reflection constantly, especially novice teachers.

The teachers had different preferred ways of communicating with the director. HY and EL chose to communicate with the director through the teacher journal rather than through individual conversation. HY felt that she could express her meaning better by writing than orally talking to the director. EL was afraid to speak out in front of a person of authority. CF and LJ both liked to communicate with Director Chen through individual conversation. They thought that it was the best way to solve their problems effectively. RB was a special case: in her first two years as a new teacher at Seed, she had communicated with Director Chen primarily through the teacher journal because she was also afraid of talking directly to an authority figure. However, in her third year when she became the administrative teacher, she preferred to communicate with the director through individual conversation, realizing this was more efficient and effective. In her new role she spent more time with the director, and thus she overcame her fear and social-cultural taboos of speaking directly with someone in a higher authority position.

The teachers all agreed that the weekly meetings served as a learning opportunity as they shared their experiences such as subject matter and how to deal with students' challenges. It also provided a good opportunity for the teachers to read and acquire new professional knowledge. The rich array and approaches

to communication met individual teacher learning styles and preferences and thus created learning opportunities to build a community of practice.

Learning in the Process of Problem Solving

The following episode, from a weekly meeting during the first week of second semester, is presented as an example of the nature of the interactive and discursive events that occurred in a problem-solving context. This particular example was chosen because the problem that arose followed a mentoring process between Director Chen and a teacher. During this episode, the discussion revealed that learning took place in the process of problem solving. Furthermore, it showed the ways that the director tried to help the teachers in solving their problems through firsthand knowledge of the child. After the problem appeared to have been resolved, the director and teacher shared their experience and insights and the director provided feedback.

Example 1: February 14, 2000

During the weekly meeting, LJ asked director Chen a question.

1. T: Director Chen, that stuffed doll, she keeps saying that's her doll.
2. D: Which child?
3. T: Wendy.
4. D: Oh, That polar bear.
5. T: She hugs that polar bear everyday. No one can touch it. "That's mine"
(T imitates Wendy's speaking). I talked to her several times.
6. D: You can tell her that the stuffed dolls belong to Seed Preschool now.
7. T: But she still thinks that...she can't accept what I am saying. She still thinks it's hers.
8. D: So her mother...in fact, her mother made a mistake here. If you want to donate your kid's stuff, you should discuss with your kid first and then make a conclusion together. You shouldn't use adult's thinking, such as: Um, the

stuffed doll is bad for my kid’s health; it will cause allergy and asthma, so you give it away. Wendy doesn’t understand what happened here.

9. T: Yeah, so she still acts like this sometimes.
10. D: You can encourage her mother. When her mom comes to pick her up, you can tell her to discuss this with Wendy again at home. Let Wendy know why she donated the stuffed dolls to school. You talked to Wendy at school, but her mother didn’t deal with this at home. Wendy can’t realize her stuffed dolls were donated to school because that is bad for her health in the first place. The stuffed dolls are bad for kids’ allergies and asthma.
11. T: Yeah, this kind of disease can’t be healed.
12. D: Yeah.

On February 15, 2000, LJ told Wendy’s mom to discuss with Wendy why her stuffed dolls were donated to the school.

March 1, 2000, during learning center time: Director Chen came to LJ and EL’s classroom to observe how children played in the new learning area. LJ was observing Wendy’s behaviors. Wendy looked at a kid hugging a stuffed doll and then asked to borrow the doll. LJ found Wendy’s attitude had changed, which prompted her to speak to Director Chen immediately:

13. T: Wendy is so polite. She can say, “Could I borrow your stuffed doll?” She really changed her behavior after I talked to her mom.
14. D: So you did talk to her mom?
15. T: Yeah, it looks like her mom talked to her at home.
16. D: Yeah, she lacked that discussion before. Therefore, she thought the dolls still belonged to her. After her mother talked to her at home, she has this kind of consciousness.
17. T: Yeah, she is so polite! (LJ is happy to observe this change in Wendy).

LJ asked Director Chen an initial question (line 1) without details. However, the director identified the situation quickly after she learned whom the teacher was

talking about (line 4). She also had noticed that the child hugged a polar bear in the classroom. LJ then explained her situation in trying to solve this problem. Based on her description, Director Chen gave her a suggestion. When the director sensed the first suggestion would not work, she gave LJ another suggestion. As Katz (1972) pointed out, an on-site trainer can give teachers suggestions quickly by observing the teacher and the child or by an extended give-and-take conversation between the teacher and the trainer. In fact, this was how the director found out the teacher's needs. She knew what the teacher had done and she had yet to do, identified her needs, and gave appropriate suggestions (line 8 & 10). From this example, we find that Chen took the family background into consideration when trying to solve a child's problem—a typical strategy that she often used.

When LJ found the child's behavior changed, she shared her finding with Director Chen immediately and received feedback (line 13-17). In fact, in Seed Preschool, the teachers not only shared their feelings with the director, but also frequently shared their feelings with other teachers, which supported their mutual learning. They often felt that opportunities to share feelings with other teachers reduced some of the feelings of inadequacy and frustration, especially of novice teachers (Katz, 1972). Similar to Lortie's (1975) findings, the data indicate the positive feedback supported teachers' confidence about their new beliefs and new practices.

The above example illustrates a process of situated learning. The director understood the context behind the teacher and child's problem and was able to give appropriate advice. When the teacher put it into practice, she saw the change in the child in the classroom. This first hand learning by the teacher seems to have immediately increased her confidence, her understanding of parent-child interaction and the importance of proactively addressing problems.

Pattern of interaction and discourse

The daily observations of the researcher and analysis of the conversations between Director Chen and the teachers revealed a pattern of problem solving interaction and discourse, described below and illustrated in Figure 1:

1. Director or the teachers initiate contact to present a question, which usually focuses on teaching and learning.
2. Director or the teachers provide suggestions or answers that move toward problem-solving.
3. The teachers try the teaching suggestions out in practice.
4. Results yield positive(problem solved) or negative(problem unsolved).
5. Opportunity for the teachers to share the result with the director or other teachers, reflecting a circling or looping pattern.
6. Director or other teachers give the teacher a new suggestion for negative results or positive feedback for good result, promoting dialogue and professional development.

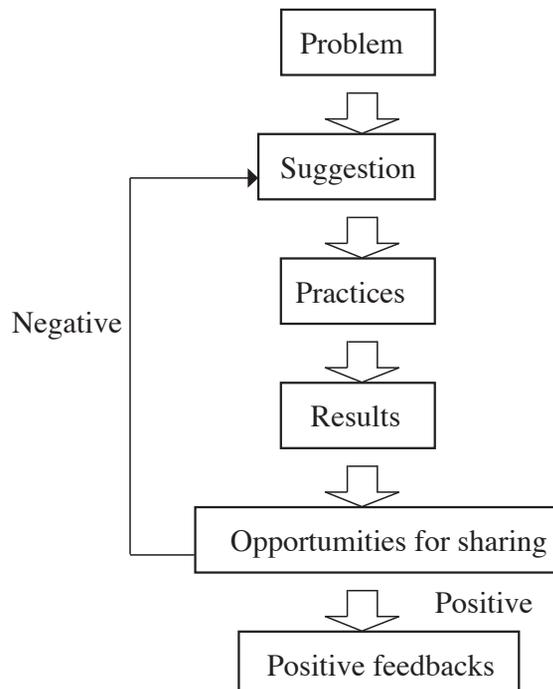


Figure 1: Pattern of interactions and discourse

This pattern of interactions showed that the working cultural in the Seed preschool can improve the teachers' learning. It contained several factors of a learning community, 1. the center topic of the communication among the director and the teachers were related to children and teaching; 2. instead of criticizing children's performance, the communication focused on problem-solving or the interesting stories of children; 3. this pattern of interactions is a circling looping, the teachers can consistently engage in a problem discussion and try out in practice until the problem was solved. 4. the teachers can receive positive feedbacks from the director or their colleagues after they share their accomplishments in teaching. This pattern of actions showed that this workplace provided a space for teacher professional dialogue which was the main factor for teacher professional development.

What was Learned?

This study illustrates the important role of the director in shaping preschool teachers' teaching and learning. The data showed that what teachers had an opportunity to learn was largely influenced by the director's role and philosophy. According to the interview data, HY learned how to emphasize the emotional aspect of education in her teaching and how to get along well with children in the preschool. RB experienced increased levels of self-confidence through interactions with Director Chen, parents and children. She learned how to communicate with parents and remain open-minded to children and the activity-based curriculum. CF had more understanding of life education and felt confident about her teaching style. Through interactions with Director Chen and the children, she gained insights on areas to grow. She was learning how to be a professional teacher and not to have her personal emotions be the dominating force. LJ changed through learning how to perceive situations from the children's point of view. She could now relax and enjoy the time with children in the preschool. EL learned how to get along well with children and how to address some of the behavioral problems that children experienced in school. In general, these teachers learned to adapt to and

adopt the culture of this particular school in which they were now teaching.

Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of a preschool director in developing a teacher’s learning community and what opportunities were created to enhance teachers’ learning. This study contributes to our understanding of a community of practice by unfolding how one particular school’s community was developed, the role of the leader in its development. The results showed how the three characteristics of a community of practice emerged through participants’ day-to-day interactions:

The domain: the professional knowledge was acquired through different media and information was distributed to and interpreted individually between director and teachers and as a collective. Gradually, those shared small stories were being stored in the organization’s memory. The director’s educational philosophy (i.e., child-centered and open-minded) became the domain of this community. Her educational philosophy was the main knowledge distributed in the organization.

The community: although the teachers were initially reticent to participate in open dialogue, the Director’s non-threatening leadership enhanced the opportunities for professional discussion among the teachers and the director over time. It is important to note, however, that the hierarchical tension was never completely resolved between the director and teachers. Nevertheless, the different opportunities for professional dialogue between director and teachers led to an organizational interpretation of the knowledge. The designs of the regular meetings, book discussion and the informal conversations contributed to the community. The teachers engaged in group discussions, problem solving and sharing information. The multiple paths for communication and mutual support from various community members fostered learning. Members of this community learned from one another, and in turn, provided each other with emotional support. The teachers not only worked collaboratively, but also became good friends. These

relationships are key to developing the trust and identity that define a community of practice. A supportive school atmosphere and opportunities for exploring, questioning, feedback, reflection, and collaboration enhanced the development and distribution of knowledge for these relatively new teachers. The teachers felt more confident in decision-making and in their teaching style when they received positive feedback from their colleagues and the director.

The practice: The pattern of interactions (Figure 1) demonstrates that the teachers were emerging as a community capable of solving problems of practice. They developed a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, books study and ways of addressing recurring problems. As Wenger points out, these conversations have contributed to community members developing a set of stories, which have become a shared repertoire for their practice.

Although this study showed that the case study preschool demonstrated certain characteristics of a community of practice and organizational learning, this preschool was still in the beginning stages of forming a learning community. Some teachers struggled in learning and adjusting to a child-centered approach, which was at odds with their training, experience, and in some cases, beliefs. As Wenger has documented in schools, changing the learning theory requires a deeper transformation and requires more time to be fully embodied in practice. The power issue was appeared in this study; it showed that non-threatening leadership might not be enough to lead the school developing to a mature learning community. The sharing leadership and the empowerment of teachers will be a crucial step in the certain of successful teacher's learning community in the future for this case study school.

This study also confirmed that a more capable guide (Vygotsky, 1978) facilitates teacher learning. In this case, however, the director, rather than an outside coach, assisted and promoted teachers' learning. She also played a "master" role enabling the teachers to observe her interactions with children and parents. This kind of master/apprentice interaction between the director and the teachers provided a rich context for the teachers and children's learning.

This study is also important in adding to the limited literature on the role of the leader in fostering a community of practice. The findings suggest that the director or administrator's role is essential for promoting and sustaining a collaborative learning community in preschools. The leader can foster openness and dialogue through playing a non-threatening leadership. These ingredients are essential in building a community of practice. Through this open approach, the teachers were willing to discuss their problem in public and seek for suggestions. At the same time, the director created different learning opportunities to meet teachers' varying needs.

This study suggest that a longitudinal study will be necessary to understand how long it takes a school to transform itself into a sustained and viable community of practice and how the director may need to position herself over time in relation to the teacher community. Future research should also explore and identify the patterns of interaction that foster learning in different types of schools, with different philosophical approaches and in varied settings.

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i Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to preserve confidentiality of participants.

一所幼稚園老師教師學習社群的實踐： 園長的角色

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摘 要

本研究使用質性研究方法探討一所幼稚園的文化，分析這所幼稚園園長如何帶領一群年輕老師在園所裡逐漸建立一個學習社群並提供學習的機會，本研究蒐集資料的方法包含了參與式觀察、訪談、隨機錄音、撰寫田野日記，並蒐集教師省思日記。研究資料顯示這位園長本著以幼兒為中心的信念，努力降低領導權威，主動和老師分享討論，提供許多溝通討論時間，並利用不同的溝通管道等方法來發展學習社群，本研究結果發現教師可從不同的溝通管道尋找出一種最適合自己與園長和同事討論的方式，並從中獲得有用的建議，應用在教室實務中，可促進教師專業發展。

關鍵詞：實踐社群、教育領導、幼兒教育、教師學習、學習社群

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