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A Professional Learning Community with an Arabian Twist

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### Abstract

This paper discusses how a western approach to a Professional Learning Community (PLC) can be implemented in an eastern setting, without taking out the essence of the culture. It is based on personal observations of how a community functions within a culture. This study seeks to explore the steps to implementing a structured PLC in which the already existing community produces empowered teachers who will be life-long learners. It describes the beginning stages of executing a PLC by enabling ordinary teachers to facilitate professional development meetings at a local, private school in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

### A Professional Learning Community with an Arabian Twist

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are important. It is more than just helping teachers develop as individuals but it is also a great way to help inculcate the idea of communal learning. Collaboration among teachers, when used effectively, is one strategy that has proven itself as a useful practice to improve instruction and student achievement. From instructional climate to instructional results, from staff engagement to staff improvement, the powerful effects of collaboration on creating successful schools is well-documented (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Newmann, King & Youngs, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Slater, 2008). Coupled with this hard evidence is the widespread recognition and almost unparalleled consensus among education experts that creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers is the primary means for improving student learning (DuFour et al., 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Arab Culture is a communal culture. From the time of birth, community is a concept that is seen and practiced. An individual is constantly encouraged to ask each other for opinions, help, advice, and more. Dependency is not seen as a sign of immaturity but rather a symbol of courage, frailty and maturity.

This paper is based on an attempt to kick-start a PLC model at Al Raja School, Kingdom of Bahrain. Four participants were chosen to facilitate the PLCs within their sections at school. They were ‘trained-on-the-job’ and then empowered through feedback and a ‘hands-off’ coaching approach with their facilitation.

### **Literature Review**

In researching about PLCs, the United States has been able to create a plethora of resources. Unfortunately, the idea of communal learning has only been avidly practiced and researched within the United States. In an attempt to look outside the States, other than big

corporations, the educational sectors from around the world have not published any PLC models or ideas that deemed fit for them. Therefore, there is a great need to take a Western model and apply it into an Eastern setting, adapting it as needed.

Al Raja school is an American curriculum school and is a culture that is well-assimilated in Arab roots and traditions. This being said, it is very important to choose and spend time in professional communities because “it takes a whole village to raise a child” (Newmann, 1994). Modeling teamwork, cooperative learning and vulnerability as adults to students only help raise future leaders who will be able lead together. As a community, most people feel it important to raise everyone’s children. Many individuals do not fancy this idea because it means being talked to, disciplined or getting opinions from every adult who are family and friends. The concept to share concern and care was not too bad. Teachers, especially the local teachers share this idea.

Almost all the teachers are always talking, sharing, collaborating, even if it is not PD time. Education is a communal concept where we all need each other to teach, learn and inspire. PLCs have existed for a long time, but it has had no formal name up until recently internationally. In saying this, the idea of having a lot more structure and productivity in the way individuals communicate with each other will make a huge difference. Instead of just ‘depending’ on each other for help and ideas—guiding the concept of community and encouraging teachers to dig beyond the surface is vital. For example, reflective dialogue as mentioned in the journal. It empowers the teachers, which will in turn empower students to want to have meaningful and healthy communication and collaboration, “In order for students and teachers to benefit from empowerment, a professional community must develop among teachers, one committed to fundamental change” (Newmann, 1994). This idea of wanting change, positive change is what will drive the age old tradition of community to an effective PLC at Al Raja.

Additionally, the purpose as Christians, is to live out and model a Christ-centered life. Ever since the church started, the disciples took time to meet in small groups to pray for each other; build each other up; study the word together and serve others. It was a sense of unity. A united body with different parts working together towards common goals helps paint the picture we see in 1 Corinthians. It is an important picture to have in schools because it helps build accountability and encourages trust amongst staff members.

The school comprises of a very diverse staff--Bahraini, Egyptian, Jordanian, Indian, Australian, American, Filipino, British, African, Sri Lankan and more. In encouraging small groups, one encourages painting a picture of heaven--unity in diversity. God created all of us in all kinds of shades and sizes. His hope for us was to get along, work together and fulfill his work here, just like the disciples did, "believers engaged in life together through teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, miracles, radical generosity, and corporate worship" (Taketa, 2012). Additionally, a sense of unity amongst teachers has been witnessed when working together in small groups and coming up with ideas of teaching our classes.

Also, in addition to the benefits of PLCs, there are varied ways PLCs can function. Some of the strategies that stand out with PLCS are a focus on learning, collaboration and feedback. DuFour (2003) mentions in the article *Building a Professional Community*, "The strategy proven most effective, however, is one that is loose and tight, a strategy that establishes a clear priority and discernible parameters and then provides each school and department with the autonomy to chart its own course for achieving the objectives (p. 14)." In letting PLC's know that the focus should be on learning for both adults and students, a tight and clear objective is established for them to achieve. But, the "loose" part of this strategy is that the PLC's have freedom in choosing how they go about what they want to learn amongst themselves. This will only help encourage accountability and responsibility.

Another major part of PLC's is to help encourage collaboration. Dumas (2010), in his dissertation states that, "creating a collaborative culture is —the first order of business for improving the effectiveness of schools. So not only is it the most important work, but it should also be dealt with first (p. 215)." Creating a collaborative nature has been an important feature all of us teachers have had to practice in our classrooms from 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. If this is the case in education, how would this concept not be applicable to us too? If one is to practice collaboration, we ought to model and do it ourselves first. So another focus for the PLC would be to engage in collaborative work because it is "urgent" for us to practice it (Dumas, 2010).

Giving feedback to adults is of utmost importance. In a blog by Keating and Eaker (2007), they mention, "When a school is organized into collaborative teams it is unrealistic to think that each team is going to develop, mature and perform at the same rate and in the same way. Certainly, some teams are going to need more attention, time and support than others." Keep this notion in mind of teams needing help, it is vital that school leaders or PLC leaders take time to observe and provide feedback to our professional learners who are working collaboratively towards one goal: learning. Unless there is no feedback, we cannot expect development of any sort, "with frequent monitoring, feedback and effective time and support everyone can get to where they should be" (Keating & Eaker, 2007).

Even though focus on learning, collaboration and feedback are three strategies we can use for the functioning of a PLC, it is an amalgam of many approaches. PLCs are versatile, just like learning is, "it may take multiple designs - coordinated as a program - to fulfill the needs of the organization, its personnel, and its students" (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014). Al Raja is only at the start of its journey of researching, discovering and concluding the benefits of a PLC; we have a long way to go yet. But it is encouraging to know that there

are models out there that have been tried, tested and worked out successfully. In having these available, there is freedom to adapt it to our culture and create an Arabian PLC.

## **Discussion**

### **Background Information**

Samuel and Amy Zwemer, RCA missionaries, came to Bahrain in obedience to a calling. While Samuel Zwemer worked towards opening up a hospital to cater to the locals, Amy Zwemer sensed another need: education. What started as a small gathering of neighborhood kids to learn English in the backyard eventually multiplied to what it is now—a non-profit, American school, which caters to the youth in Bahrain. The school is located in the heart of the capital, Manama. It is assimilated in Arab culture and the community surrounding the school has an Arab touch to it; this means that education is given utmost value. Bahrain does not have school districts. All schools and educational facilities fall under one branch of the government and are looked after by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Al Raja is a bilingual school (Arabic & English) and the staff is an eclectic mix of local (Bahrainis), Egyptian, Jordanian, Indian, American, Filipino, and British nationals. The classes are taught in both languages, the emphasis on English is dominant in the high school. Since education is of utmost important in the culture, it is a mandate to finish high school and go on for further education. The student body mostly comprise of Arab descent. Almost all of the students speak Arabic at home; the few exceptions are American, European and Indian families who opted to put their children at the school from kindergarten and expose them to Arabic and English. The students are all fluent in either one language or both. They can communicate, read and write in both languages. The school caters to middle class and upper-middle class working families. Even though private institutions have a reputation of being expensive, the school is affordable in comparison to other private institutions in the country.



Up until around seven years ago, the school did not have weekly professional development for the staff members. Teachers taught like they had always known and seen. Any form of 'development' for staff members was deemed as "done" with their educational degree. But since the implementation of weekly PD's for our staff, the response has been interesting to observe. The topics and teachings are mimicked from the west and chosen by the school leaders. The PDs are usually a lecture/activity-based time where teachers are told what to do, how to do it and then report back on how the new topic panned out in their classes.

Implementing PDs has been an exciting journey for Al Raja, but it has started to take on a negative effect on the teaching staff. The teachers feel overwhelmed with the many things they have had to tackle this year and PDs do not seem to be helping the situation. To tackle this negative attitude, a 'Professional Learning Community' approach with the teachers was implemented. This idea sprung from the highly innovative and creative lessons teachers shared about during PDs. *What if teachers were given ownership of their own learning?* So at the start of this school year, with our PD topic 'Data into Action', the author, along with the school leaders, decided to try out the PLC method. Eric Sheninger (2014) states, "education is at crossroads, and it needs innovative leaders who possess the knowledge, skills, and fortitude to move schools forward" (p. 23). Keeping this notion in mind, it is about time, the teachers at Al Raja School are empowered and are not dictated on what they do.

### **Membership Rationale**

Culturally, people are very hospitable and welcoming to everyone. Arab culture is a warm one and a sense of community amongst Arabs is often felt when living here. But to really make an impact in people's lives here and to get on the inside of a community, there needs to be a deep trusting relationship between the two parties involved. The hope for a PLC

is to help build confidence in the staff to become their own leaders and life-long learners. After communicating with leaders, it is impossible to add any more costs on to the school budget, but training is much needed. The equipment is in place but we are lacking in trained, confident teachers. Bringing in experts will be a waste of time and money because of the trust element.

In creating a PLC within the school system, it would be valuable to pick the teachers who were the “underdogs” of the school. These women and men like to work hard behind the scenes, have meaningful relationships with most of the staff members and, can communicate effectively. Between the elementary and high school, a PLC of four teachers is created dividing each section into Arabic and English. The teachers are a diverse mix of nationals; are tech-savvy and teachable; are able to communicate in both Arabic and English sufficiently; are deeply invested in their relationships with other staff members; are trusted in the community, especially for their reliability. These teachers would help pioneer strong PLCs within their departments and then their whole sections. In fact, unconsciously, they already do; it’s just not on a professional level, yet.

To start the PLC at Al Raja, a meeting with these four unique individuals personally and as a whole will be held. The reason for the two meetings: one individual and one group is because time and personal communication are far more effective than just holding joint meetings, “the teacher leader demonstrates a deep understanding of the teaching and learning processes...[and] works collaboratively with colleagues” (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2008, p. 17). Giving the teachers the value they deserve for this PLC will only help strengthen the value of the community they will build. At the meeting, individuals will discuss the reasons, boundaries, professionalism and workings of effective PLCs. Along with these topics, the mission of building confidence amongst staff members for being life-long “independent” learners are addressed also.

After meeting with these teachers, we will jump straight into the PD sessions of ‘Data into Action’ with each section. At the end of every week, these teachers will report back individually and as a whole team, and set target dates to reach out to the rest of the staff. In time, these PLCs will be encouraged to delve into their own learning and modeling by choosing topics that best help them grow. This will not only teach responsibility amongst staff but it will serve as a platform to exercise professionalism, “people grow through challenge[s] and hence [will be] stretched” (Wiseman, Allen, Foster, 2013, p. 72). Unnecessary banter and gossip will be reduced and more conversations about student learning, technology use at work and building each other up will be encouraged.

Weekly updates from the core PLC will be required as their PLCs grow in size and confidence. These PLCs will be allowed to create their own versions of support, depending on the guidelines they set in place. It is important make time to meet with the core team personally and see how they can be supported as they run PLCs within the school system.

### **Participants**

Brian is the middle/high school English coordinator. His leadership skills within his department are noteworthy. He is well liked by the teachers around him and is very organized with his work. He is also pretty fluent in Arabic and maintains a friendly demeanor with his colleagues. Brian is approachable, yet commanding with his presence. Brian’s existing leadership skills needed a challenge; it had to go beyond the minor leadership tasks that he had been handling in school. Brian is able to inspire and that skill needed to be showcased on a larger scale.

Fatima is the religion teacher (Islam) for our middle/high school section. Three years ago, it discovered that she had received her masters in education. She mentioned her interest in helping and leading other Arabic teachers. She comes off, as a shy person but is eager to learn and lead her peers. She is quick to help translate to her Arabic-speaking colleagues

when they do not understand topics of PD, or contents of any staff meetings. Fatima is friendly, approachable and popular amongst many of the Arab teachers. Fatima needed an opportunity to come out of her shell and lead her peers.

Carol is the grade 4 English teacher. She is from Egypt and is very fluent in both English and Arabic. She is meticulous with her work and her students. She sets high standards in her classroom and is mindful of helping her students reach it. She is consistent with her instruction, which helps her students know what to expect. She is also open to trying new activities with her lessons. Carol is humble, willing to learn, and very caring. She is approachable and sensitive to her colleagues' needs. Carol has also displayed sincerity in her work ethic and is a good listener. An opportunity to use these abilities in front of her colleagues even though she is reserved and quite shy to speak up was what Carol needed.

Mariam is quite shy, at first, but it was only due to the language barrier. Mariam's English is broken, and is nervous to share her ideas. But she can be assertive when she needs to be. She is flexible, adaptable and easy to work with. She is the grade 1 Arabic teacher and plays acting supervisor when needed. The Arabic teachers in the elementary section look up to her and trust her advice. Mariam was the perfect candidate to help bridge the Arabic-speaking teachers to the PLC structure at school.

### **Plan & Process**

The pre-planned PLC design that was put together did not completely manifest itself. After meeting with the Principal and PD head, Robert, for this year, the time frame would not work with the plan that was proposed: *Data into Action* had to start right away. On August 30, Mr. Robert, introduced the new topic of discussion to the teaching staff. After the presentation was done, he called together the four teachers suggested to be coaches/facilitators. This was the plan—the teaching staff was to be divided into four

sections based on their method of communication: Elementary Arabic, Elementary English, Middle/High School Arabic, and Middle/High School English.

The chosen four belong to each of these sections and would facilitate/coach their teachers for the next 12-15 weeks. The plan was presented to the teachers: Fatima and Mariam were to lead the Arabic sections; Brian and Carol were to lead the English sections. Robert explained that since there was a shortage in time, mentoring and training would occur during the journey. The teachers were enthusiastic and positive about their assigned roles. A meeting time to debrief was set before the start of our first PD meeting for the year.

Coaching a group of teachers to implement a PLC is new to Al Raja School. It is tricky to introduce this concept into a culture where the norm is 'do as you are told'. As a coach 'in-the-making', being versatile with the role and the expectations of Fatima, Carol, Mariam and Brian was vital. Being a dictator with the teachers would have proved unproductive, yet there was no expectation for the participants to have all the answers right away either.

"There is no one agreed-upon list of characteristics of effective coaches across the nation. Nor is there a list of qualifications for those who are candidates for the coaching positions. This occurs because there is no standardized role and responsibilities for coaches. If schools or districts tailor their coach expectations based on purpose or goals of their coaching program, this inconsistency makes sense." (Killion & Harrison, 2006, p. 97)

To acquire an understanding of what the chosen facilitators thought about PLC's, a Google form was sent to the teachers to fill out. This form required my teachers to reflect on their understanding of PLCs before they started facilitating one within their sections.

The teachers' responses to each question depicted an eagerness to start their roles as facilitators and dig deeper into starting a functional PLC at Al Raja School. The positive

responses to the question built up an excitement and nervousness for our first meeting.

Robert, Fatima, Mariam, Carol and Brian came in for the meeting. Being a ‘content-focused’ coach, “zeroing in on the daily tasks of planning, teaching...suggesting a framework and tools of addressing...principles of learning” (Killion & Harrison, 2006, p. 12) helped ease the nervousness during the meeting. The facilitators had to be equipped and as their coach, being well prepared had to be modeled.

### **Data Collection & Results**

Weeks 1-3: Modeling the role of a content-focused coach continued for three weeks. PowerPoint’s were prepared ahead of time and was based on the content they had to cover with the sections; the facilitators met with me every week to get an understanding of what they were going to cover; resources were put together and plans for how they facilitated their groups were developed too. At the end of the first two weeks, my facilitators were expected to fill out a reflection form. A shift was made in coaching techniques: collegial coach, “increase teachers’ professional dialogue and help them reflect on their work” (Killion & Harrison, 2006, p. 12) was modeled. The facilitators focused on their communities and were helping build a strong foundation of trust with their sections.

Week 4 & 5: When we meet for our usual weekly meeting, I announced that a PowerPoint on the content would not be prepared by me for this week. The facilitators were not thrilled to hear this. I confirmed that my role of helping them out did not change but I was slowly letting go of providing all the resources to them. The facilitators were encouraged to do the same with their section teachers. I encouraged my facilitators to answers questions with questions, “there are great thinkers and there are great teachers; often these are different. Great thinkers are smart; great teachers make others smart” (Wiseman, Allen & Foster, 2013, p. 73). Challenging my facilitators was my first step to finally kick-starting the actual PLC

part of the project. I wanted to empower my facilitators to depend on themselves and in-turn, encourage their teachers to do the same.

The Arabic sections were observed closely to check how the implementation was working out culturally. There was a storm brewing: a clash of leadership roles and gaining control. An older coordinator, Noor, in the section, was undermining Mariam's authority as a facilitator. Noor felt threatened that her control as a coordinator was lost and her section was not recognizing her. In retaliation and to reinforce her control, she ignored Mariam's instructions during the PD meetings. Noor took time to ask Robert about the topic and then proceeded to meet with the teachers in her section, individually. She explained all the information to them and ordered Mariam to fulfill other tasks during the section meetings. Since Noor is older and has a leadership role at school, Mariam did not address the issue but complied with the behavior. It is only after the vice-principals and Robert got involved, the situation was stabilized. Since every section had further divided themselves into smaller groups, Noor was asked to lead one of the groups to help her feel recognized for her experience and role at school.

Week 6 & 7: The weekly meetings came to end. One-on-one meetings with teachers were conducted to encourage dialogue and reflection. Teachers reflected on how their PLCs were blossoming, not knowing that they were facilitating successful PLCs within their section. For each one of these weeks, a facilitation challenge was presented to the facilitators: set a good pace and be mindful of your time; walk around and sit in on the teachers' discussions, participate if necessary; give feedback to their suggestions. By the end of week seven, feedback was sent out to the facilitators based on the observations that were made. The feedback focused on their strengths as facilitators.

Week 8 & 9: The facilitators were encouraged to meet with each other and decide how they wanted to take their sections forward with content and facilitation. There was no

check up on them or any attempt to micro-manage the situation. After the PD for the week, the teachers were able to debrief on how their meeting together helped them. In helping them reflect, the facilitators were able to see the benefits of collaborating and finding solutions together. Some of the facilitators mentioned how they modeled the same to their sections.

Week 10 & 11: The four teachers were interviewed. They were asked about their development as a PLC facilitators based on these six questions:

- How have you seen yourself grow into the role of a coach?
- What are some of your strengths that helped the coaching process?
- What were some of your concerns as you walked into the role?
- How do you feel you've empowered other teachers into being coaches/life-long learners?
- What are some ways you want to improve as you continue this role for a few more weeks?
- What could I have done better to prepare you for this coaching role?

With each interview, it was clear that the four teachers grew comfortable into their roles. They were able to recognize their strengths, and ways to improve in order to move forward. The interviews were also a way to help each of the participants reflect on their journey and help empower them to continue confidently in their roles.

### **Conclusions and Further Studies**

In working towards executing a PLC at Al Raja, the following findings and conclusions can be drawn with all the data that was collected: The teachers at Al Raja have a plethora of knowledge on teaching strategies; many of them only mention their knowledge when asked about it. They are eager to learn and are open to trying new strategies in their classroom, but most of them are not pro-active about expressing their interest. Many teachers are insecure about the language barrier between Arabic and English. This mindset holds the teachers back from communicating expertise. Much information during professional development meetings



is lost in translation for the Arabic-speaking teachers. It is important that a translator is informed of the content ahead of time to avoid confusion during the meeting. If there is no translator, the presenter should be fluent in Arabic and English to help explain and answer questions during staff meetings/presentations.

Al Raja School has successful professional learning communities within sections and departments. But it is not a whole school community, yet. Teachers communicate and collaborate within their comfort zones; they can be encouraged to go beyond their sections to share, lead and inspire. This practice will also help break a hierarchal perspective and approach to community. This can be achieved when teachers are given more opportunities to feel empowered; many of them are experts on different topics and should be given chances to lead peers towards their knowledge.

Professional Learning Communities can exist within Al Raja without removing the complete essence of an Arab understanding of a community. Teachers should be encouraged to be more intentional about the topics they discuss while they commune. The school leaders, supervisors, and coordinators through modeling should expect conversations topics that revolve around personal and peer development. Arab cultural understandings of respect, control and power need to be understood and tackled sensitively when assigning leadership roles to teachers.

Professional learning communities breed coaches. Through the experience of helping train four facilitators, it is safe to say that four coaches have been born. Their next challenge is to pass on their training to someone else in their section. Al Raja School is moving forward with its professional learning community. Teachers have expressed dedication and openness towards leadership roles, inspiring peers, encouraging themselves and empowering each other. This picture of community seems almost too perfect to come true at Al Raja School. But when the Zwemers came to Bahrain in 1899, they came with the idea of building

community in their hearts. God started this school to reach out to the people here and the hope is that this picture of a PLC will only help extend the kingdom of heaven.

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