

The concept of professional learning community in modern American theory of education

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Abstract. The article highlights the meaning of one of the concepts of school culture development in modern American theory of education, particularly the concept of professional learning community. The impact of its main ideas to the organizational school culture is explained. The main purpose of introducing the concept is to improve the quality of students' knowledge that is provided by the constant attention to their learning process and continuous professional development of school staff. School as learning community works on such principles: the creation of conditions to ensure that the students really learn culture of cooperation, the focus on results. Implementation of all these ideas into practice requires great effort to school staff: focus on teaching students more than teaching, common work on improving the learning process, awareness of responsibility for results and continuous of development.

Keywords: *organizational culture, school, professional learning community, cooperation, professional development.*

Introduction. Nowadays the process of Ukraine's integration into European and world educational space largely determines the necessity of solving a great number of complex problems. To our opinion and in accordance with the "National doctrine of education development" one of the main problems is improving the quality of Ukrainian education by monitoring and implementation of best foreign practices. In this regard, the experience of the United States of America to establish professional learning communities (PLC) is of great scientific interest.

Analysis of relevant research. It should be noted that a significant contribution to the development of the PLC was made by such American theorists of education as R. Evans, B. King, K. Louis, K Petersen, P. Senge, K. Chapman and others. In the scientific works of Ukrainian researchers this problem has not been studied comprehensively so far, although some aspects of it were highlighted in the works of A. Sbrueva, M. Boychenko, A. Chernakova etc.

The aim of the article is to highlight the peculiarities of the concept of PLC, which is one of the concepts of school culture in the modern American theory of education.

Materials and methods. In the article the following methods are used: general research methods – analysis, synthesis, comparison, classification and generalization, which were necessary for studying the works of American researchers in the field of theory of education, official and normative documents of American schools which works on the principles of PLC; specifically scientific methods – terminological analysis which helped reveal the meaning of investigated pedagogical phenomena – school culture; systemic-structural analysis which helped to clarify the interaction of the structural elements of the investigated phenomenon; empirical – interviews and E-correspondence with American scientists for the purpose of clarification and verification of the received data.

Results and their discussion.

The concept of PLC is connected with processes of decentralization in education and establishing cooperation between teachers, which involves deep changes in the practice of teaching in the school, and the attitude of teachers and students towards their work. Its main idea according to the opinion of one of modern American theorists of education K. Bezzina, is the belief that the

actual processes of school improvement are of self government nature [2]. Such processes are more effective under the condition when the school is an organization that can monitor and determine the content of local and national educational programs, combined with its state support [4]. In other words, when schools have the right and possibility to work in regime of autonomy and support, the probability of their improvement is much higher.

The main purpose of introducing the concept is to improve the quality of students' knowledge that is provided by the constant attention to their learning process and continuous professional development of school staff. American theorists of education D. Ball and D. Cohen connect the PLC with a new paradigm in American pedagogy and call it "pedagogy of professional development". It is described as a dynamic interaction between teachers, students, curriculum content and environment. In this complex interaction teaching is defined as "what the teacher does, says and thinks along with students about the content of the curriculum using specific methods in a specific environment" [1, p. 13]. Thus, the teacher must possess not only knowledge in pedagogy, but also the skills of instruction, skills of a Manager. In addition, as noted by A. Blankstein, P. Houston and G. Cole, if the knowledge, skills and basic actions of teachers are considered as a source of knowledge of pupils, the achievements of the pupils are significantly increased [3]. Therefore, teachers in their daily practice should not be afraid to improvise, to make assumptions, to experiment and test the results of their actions, if they want to develop [1].

We tend to share the opinion of a leading theorist of PLC R. DuFour that for reorganization the school into a professional learning community it is equally important the professional growth of teachers, improving the quality of their teaching and the confidence that students are studying consciously and conscientiously. The researcher stresses: the work of PLCs is based on the assumption that the key to improving the quality of the learning process of students is a continual process of teachers' training and improving the quality of their professional skills [6]. However, according to R. DuFour, ambiguous interpretations of the term PLC, which exist in the American modern theory of education, can present the risk of losing its meaning. In addition, the lack of precision is an obstacle to the realization of this concept. With the aim of

eliminating ambiguity and deeper analysis of the concept of PLC a scientist formulated the main ideas on which it is based in several publications:

1. The creation of conditions to ensure that the students are really learning. This model of school is based on the belief that the mission of formal education is not so much the belief that students are taught but that they learn. Thus, teachers focus on teaching each student, and therefore, the goal of “quality education for all” “ceases to be political hyperbole” [7, p. 6]. To achieve this goal, the members of PLS are guided by a clear vision of what should be a school to help all students learn successfully. They take collective responsibility in which everybody has a clear role in the transformation of the school, set results-oriented goals, and check their progress. The main methods of improving of students’ academic achievement are: to unite efforts of teachers to determine what each student should study, early intervention in the learning process, control of receiving additional time or consultations by students, if it’s required, as well as extensions and enrichment of the educational material when the students have reached the necessary results.

R. DuFour notes that teachers of traditional schools offer several options for teaching underachieving students: simplification of educational material, providing special education, reducing requirements for individual groups of students within a class, providing additional educational services to students outside of school or even exclusion from school. At the same time, the model of school-PLC solves the problem of underachieving students based on the following principles:

- constancy. The teaching staff is constantly watching the students, and therefore quickly identify those who need additional time and support;
- focus on intervention rather than restoration. Teachers take an active part in the learning process of students, as soon as there is a need for assistance, and don’t rely on summer schools, repeated or additional courses;
- directivity. Instead of encouraging students to seek additional support the curriculum requires them to spend extra time and receive additional assistance until they learn the required materials [7].

In addition, to be an organization in which all pupils study successfully, the school provides ongoing professional development of teachers, which is inseparable from daily practice process. Thus, the learning process in a PLC encompasses both students and teachers.

2. Culture of cooperation. Members of the school community at PLC are a team of like-minded people whose work is interdependent. They work to achieve a common goal – quality education for all students. Theorist PLC R. DuFour said: “The team is the engine that provides the execution of the PLC efforts, and at the same time, it is the foundation of the entire organization. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of teamwork in development and improvement of school organization” [5, p. 6].

The most important thing is that teamwork contributes to the appearance of the staff of the school a sense of community. This in turn enables teachers to learn from each other. In the vast majority of cases, according to surveys of members of professional learning communities, the impetus for professional growth and improve-

ment was the experience of colleagues. The ability to “see through the eyes of each other” fosters trust and respect for colleagues, the establishment of the collective experience [11, p. 13]. The acquisition by teachers of new knowledge and skills in this way eventually change their practices. Under such conditions, teachers gradually begin to accept the goal of professional activities of the academic community as their own. This phenomenon is directly associated with the characteristics of a culture of professional learning communities. Thus, the team work contributes to the emergence of coherence as a feature of the professional learning community culture [9].

However, it is important to emphasize that cooperation does not lead to improved outcomes, while team members do not focus on the necessary purposes. According to R. DuFour, cooperation should be a mean to an end, not an end in itself. In many schools operating on a traditional model teachers want to cooperate, until the focus is their own work in class. A distinctive feature of PLC is that cooperation in it is a systematic process in which teachers work together to change the practice in the classroom so that it led to the improvement of students' achievements, professional development of team members and the school as a whole [6].

Another theorist of PLC R. Eaker noted, that schools that function as professional learning communities, are generally characterized by a culture of collaboration. The isolation of the teacher that is traditional to modern schools replaced with collaborative processes that are deeply rooted in the daily life of the school. Teachers don’t just encourage cooperating – they are called to be active participants in collective action to build capacity of schools to help all students to work at a high level [8]. So, teachers who are the members of a professional team of PLC, regularly take part in collective analysis of not only excellence in teaching but also excellence in teaching. In addition, members of school organizations are discussing the possibility of its implementation, according to the level of development of their current practices and the current level of educational achievements. Thus, they try to come to consensus regarding the vital school issues through the creation of joint knowledge, but not total unification of opinions [8]. We agree with the opinion of the researcher that this collective analysis allows the members of the school organization to develop new skills and abilities, which in turn will lead to new experiences. Gradually, this increased attention to the creation of common knowledge leads to fundamental changes in relationships, beliefs and habits that ensure the development of school culture.

Under these conditions the role of the leader, the head of the institution, changes significantly. American theorists of education have noted that leadership in a PLC is based on the principle “power through” others to ensure shared vision and goals, unlike most traditional schools where leadership is based on the principle “power over” [12, p. xix]. These communities can be described as “collective of individualities, which are bound together by the good will, shared ideas and ideals. This relationship is strong enough, which makes the team of many “I’s” into a single “we”” [12, p. v]. Thus, the formal leader of the school, together with teachers creates opportunities for the various models of adoption of vital for school organiza-

tion decisions. It should be noted that under these conditions all members of the school organization, including the formal leader, are the members of the team. Therefore, teachers have the opportunity to learn management, not only to the teaching experience of their colleagues.

Modern American theorists of education pay attention to such aspect of the culture of professional learning communities as the level of trust between their members. So, R. Macmillan, M. Meyer and S. Northfield stress that trust between the principal and teachers are the relations affected by both sides. They are not installed automatically, but are based on the specific agreements and continued support. Without a sufficient level of trust in school some teachers may hinder even the minimum requirements for the implementation of school reforms [10]. A culture of trust is indicated as one of the most important characteristics of successful schools, along with such as mutual respect and cooperation of teachers with the administration. Researchers A. Bryk and B. Schneider, taking into account the whole complex of interdependencies which lie at the basis of social relations within the school organization, noted: "Regardless of how much formal authority any member of the school organization has, they all remain dependent on each other to achieve the desired results and the feeling of importance of their own actions" [4, p. 41].

So, the school forms a culture of extended rights and opportunities (culture of empowerment) for each member of the school community. In most cases, according to T. Sergiovanni, just absence of this type of school culture and the presence of a strong charismatic leader, can be an obstacle to implementing successful change in school organizations, implementation of educational reform in general. Therefore, the traditional vision of the school as a formal organization limits the chances of empowerment of its members. The organization of relations within the school on the model of the community, establishing personal relationships, common goals, as it is done in the professional school community, is, in the opinion of the researcher, a more favorable framework for successful school reform [12].

Important is the fact, as noted by the theorists of PLC that the culture of such schools are action oriented [6; 7; 8]. It is characterized by more rapid, compared to traditional schools, transform aspirations into actions and visions into a reality. This can be explained by the fact that teachers work as a team; appreciate the interaction and experience; realize that the most successful development in school is only provided with the help of implementation of active operations; participate in collective evaluation of the overall achievements, which acts as a catalyst for action.

Analysis of the modern American scientific sources that consider features of functioning of the PLC has allowed us to highlight another feature of the culture of these schools – focus on continuous improvement that involves the following steps:

- gathering information about the current quality of education;
- development of strategies and ideas that draw on the strengths and help to eliminate weak points in the learning process;
- implementation of these strategies and ideas;

- analysis of the impact of changes with the definition of positive and negative experiences;
- applying the new experience in the next cycle of continuous change [5, p. 2-4].

The purpose of these actions is not simply the learning of new reform strategies, and, above all, creating conditions for continuous learning – that is, an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as temporary assignments or projects, which in the end will be completed, but as a way of conducting daily business with a "lifetime" perspective. In addition, participation in this process is not a privilege of leaders but responsible work of each teacher.

So, the process of collaboration in a PLC aimed at creating a special culture focused on continuous improvement of school organization, which provides training for teachers in parallel with the implementation of their daily professional activities.

3. The focus on results. Members of a PLC evaluate their performance according to the results. Working together to improve students' achievements becomes the daily task of every teacher who participates in the ongoing process of identifying the current level of students' achievements, establishing goals to increase this level, of collaboration in the achievement of goals, and periodic review of achievements. Thus, each member of the school community is aware that all joint actions of teachers (focus on the process of student learning, collective teamwork, collective analysis of the achievements, focus on action and continuous improvement) must be assessed not on the value of intention, but only for real results. As R. DuFour noted, "while the initiative will not be evaluated on the basis of real results, they will represent only the occasional flash in the dark rather than purposeful improvement" [5, p. 4].

This focus on the result, determines the need to set and achieve goals that are measurable. In addition, it requires the establishment of clear formal criteria, according to which the level of students' achievements is assessed during the school year. This assessment is undertaken in the first place, in order to detect the most challenging subjects for students in the curriculum, as well as students who need assistance in their study. Another purpose of these activities is to identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses in the process of their own teaching of various subjects, teaching each other for the sake of eliminating deficiencies and of improving the quality of teaching [5]. Consequently, frequent assessment of the current level of educational achievements is a tool that allows to improve the learning process of both students and teachers, and therefore to ensure more effective functioning of the school.

The conclusions. The implementation of all these ideas into practice requires great effort of school staff: focus on teaching students more than teaching, joint work to improve the learning process, awareness of accountability for results and continuous development. If the teachers do make every possible effort to conform to these principles, their collective ability to help all students increase significantly. Once the mechanisms of self-discipline are not enough to provide such work, the school ceases to improve. Thus, increase or decrease the effectiveness of the professional learning community depends not only on the

characteristics of its concept as such, but from the most, in our view, important conditions for the improvement of

any school – responsibility and perseverance of its staff.

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Концепция профессионального учебного сообщества в современной американской теории образования

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена раскрытию содержания одной из концепций развития культуры школы в современной американской теории образования, а именно концепции профессионального учебного сообщества. Объясняется влияние ее основных идей на организационную культуру школы. Основной целью внедрения концепции является повышение качества знаний учащихся, что обеспечивается непрерывным вниманием к процессу их обучения и перманентным профессиональным развитием сотрудников школы. Школа как учебная община работает на таких принципах: создание условий для того, чтобы учащиеся действительно учились, культура сотрудничества, нацеленность на результат. Реализация всех этих идей требует больших усилий коллектива школы: акцентирование внимания на процессе обучения учеников больше, чем на преподавании, совместной работы над его улучшением, ответственности за результаты работы и постоянного развития

Ключевые слова: организационная культура, школа, профессиональное учебное сообщество, сотрудничество, профессиональное развитие.