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Establishing a community of inquiry : a case study of an instructional leadership intervention by a principal.

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Abstract

The principal and teachers of a small independent South African school noticed a significant gap in the implementation of an effective Intermediate Phase (IP) reading curriculum. The principal decided to establish a Community of Inquiry (CoI) at the school to focus on this problem, and to research the process. The main purpose of this research was to investigate the affordances and constraints of the establishment of a CoI for the professional development of teachers as an instructional leadership intervention by the principal. The sub-questions that emerged from the main research question were: what would be the affordances and constraints of the principal establishing, facilitating and researching the CoI; what would be to the benefit of the teachers (and their learners) of establishing such a community for professional development and reading instruction in the IP; and, what processes are entailed in establishing an in-school CoI? To what degree, if any, would the CoI be a generating space to answer the research questions and aims? The literature review for the study explored the means of professional development available to educators and principals, especially Professional Learning Communities and their more focused interventions – Communities of Inquiry, and that professional development needs to target four levels – the *teacher*, their *teaching*, the *community* and collegiality at the school, and the *principal* as a developmental leader, in order for there to be an improvement in students' learning. The concerning South African context with regard to reading in the IP was outlined, as well as that in the school. The South African curriculum IP learning outcomes and assessment standards for reading were critically explored against the backdrop of international curricula. The process of learning to read was traced. Hindrances to effective reading were also explored. The qualitative research design was an applied case study. Grounded Theory methods were used to reduce the data from the transcripts of CoI sessions. The findings of the research were that there are many affordances to establishing an in-school CoI, and that these benefits far outweigh the constraints. The CoI provided a germinating locus in which participants could begin to address the problems related to reading and reading instruction in the IP. It enabled the principal to develop as an instructional leader, and the teachers to develop as professionals and reading instructors. In hindsight, this project was a vital one, but considerably ambitious, difficult to implement, and perhaps even constrained in the sense of the principal establishing, facilitating and researching this process herself. However, without the principal driving, facilitating and researching the CoI, the question emerges whether such an intervention would have been established. Sometimes external insistences from authority can provide valuable impetus for change at schools, as long as these are sensitively handled and one has the support and trust of participants. The actual acceleration in learning that the participants experienced was extensive, and, sometimes it is only the principal that can play this role – especially in newly established communities. Much more research and support for principals in becoming instructional leaders and in establishing CoIs at their schools is required in the South African context.

Keywords
Community of Inquiry, Instructional, Leadership, Professional Development, Reading Instruction, Professional Learning Community, RNCS, Qualitative Research, Applied Case Study, Grounded Theory.