New Directions in Leadership? Early Lessons from Chicago's School Social Work Professional Learning Community Project

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Michael Kelly & Emily Shayman
Loyola University Chicago
School of Social Work

Andrew Brake
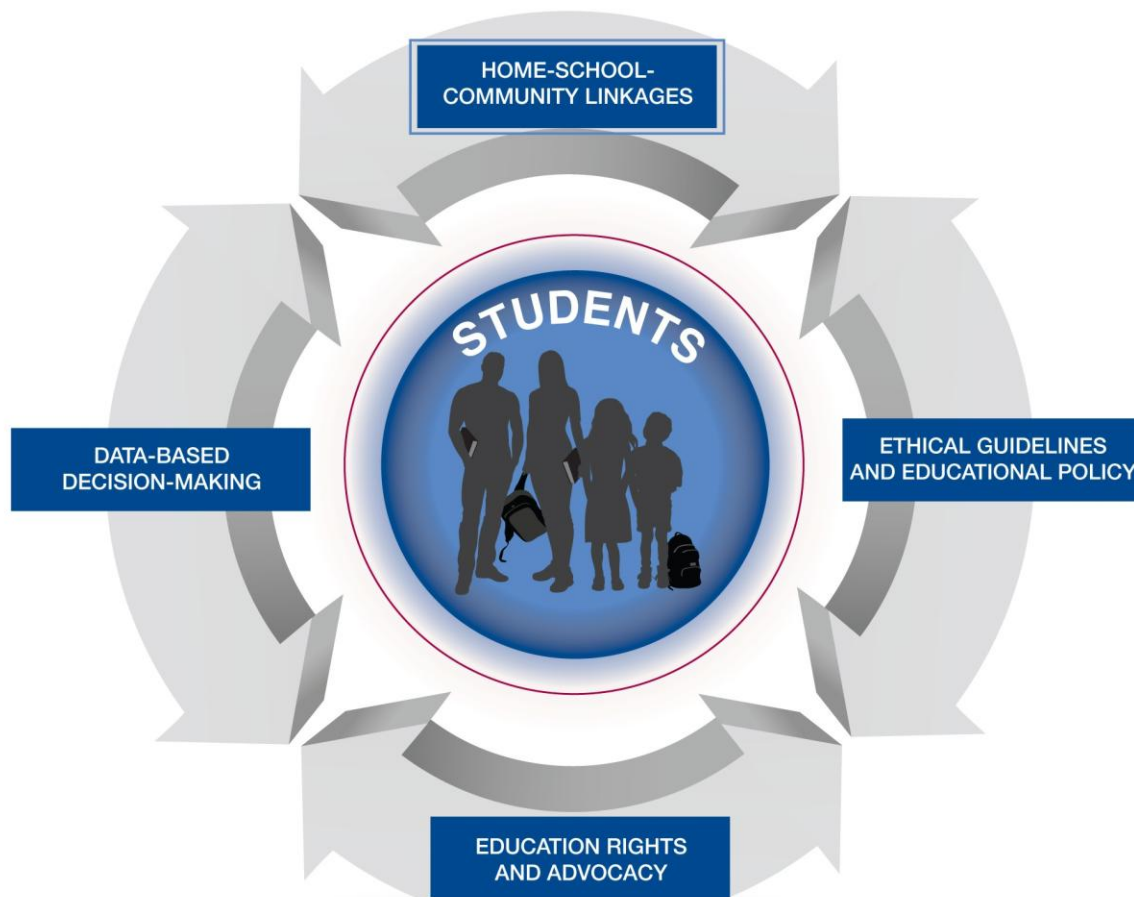Northeastern Illinois University
Social Work Program

Colleen Cicchetti & Sybil Dunlap
Anne & Robert H. Lurie
Children's Hospital of Chicago
Department of Child &
Adolescent Psychiatry

Overview

- Introductions
- Current Context of SSW
- The Need for a New Approach?
- Background: Professional Learning Communities
- Overview of The SSW PLC Project in Chicago
- Methods & Study Design
- Preliminary Themes From Analysis of Year 1 SSW Participant Experiences
- Activity: Advancing Leadership Through Local PLCs?
- Next Steps with the PLC Project

Trends From Prior SSW Surveys

- Integration of Studies of SSW Practice
  - Shift from casework to clinical from 1960-present
    - Little focus on evidence based practice
    - Little focus on primary level factors
    - Little use of evaluation strategies (Costin, 1968, 1975; Allen-Meares, 1977, 1994; Kelly et al., 2010)
- Creation of National Model of Practice
  - EBP and school wide prevention/intervention
    - Assessment and evaluation of practice
  - Maintain SSW identity (focus on family & community) (Frey et al., 2012)

Challenges Facing the Field

Overall:

- SSW Are Not Promoting Universal Strategies
  - SSW are not doing them consistently and DO NOT feel prepared to do them competently
  - SSW Spend most of their time with at-risk students in Tier 3 and crisis intervention situations
    - Putting out fires rather than prevention & coordination
- SSW Are Not Prepared to Use Data
  - SSW report lacking competency, resources, and supports to be data-driven and evidence-informed in their practice
    - School, community, state, and national responses needed
- The major policy and research initiatives of the last 20 years are not being significantly reflected in day-to-day SSW practice…

A Tough Question…

What can we do to better train the future and current SSW workforce to become more visible, valuable, and indispensable leaders in schools?

A Need for a New Approach to SSW Professional Development?

One That Prioritizes:

1. Continuous & Sustained Professional Development
2. A Collegial Community of Professional Support & Press
3. Individual, Project-Focused, Goals
4. Incremental, Time Specific Tasks
5. Balancing Evidence Based Practice & Practice Based Evidence
6. Opportunities to Present & Problem-Solve with Professional Peers

Professional Learning Communities in Schools

PLCs defined as a group of school professionals, "sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Toole & Louis, 2002, in Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006).

PLCs are both a *professional community* AND a continuous, collaborative, *capacity building process* based on 2 assumptions:

1. Professional knowledge is situated in day-to-day lived experiences of teachers, grounded through critical reflection with others of the same experience;

2. Actively engaging teachers in PLCs will increase knowledge and enhance student learning.

Professional Learning Communities in Schools

When effective, PLC models have been found to have a positive impact on:

1. Helping teachers become empowered and student-centered;

2. More collaborative in focus on student learning;

3. Student comprehension & achievement (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

Professional Learning Communities in Schools

- No current research on SSW / SMH and use of PLC models.

- Research on *school mental health teams* also been limited

  - However, they appear to be effective in organizing colleagues, tasks, and teaming to have a positive impact on students' social emotional well-being, academic achievement and school climate; particularly for low-income students of color (Haynes, 2008).

Professional Learning Communities in Schools

- Moreover, over the last decade, SSW / SMH professionals have been tasked with leading multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks for all levels of their schools' academic and behavioral supports (Kelly, in Massat, Kelly & Constable, 2014)

- Simply put:

  - The <u>expectation has increased</u> for SSW / SMH professionasl <u>to take on leadership roles and develop greater professional capacity</u>;

  - There is a great need for SMH training efforts to focus in these areas.

The School Social Work Professional Learning Community Project (The PLC Project)

Purpose

- To develop a sustainable, two-year professional learning community for SSW professionals.

Components

1. Professional Development: Leadership & Capacity Building

   - Goal: Provide participants with year-round structured training and support, to improve school mental health leadership and professional across all three MTSS tiers.

2. Research: Examine Process & Impact of PLC Model

   - Goal: Study how the PLC model shapes SMH professionals' leadership and capacity-building efforts

The PLC Project

Two-Year Model, Two Cohorts of SSW Professionals

- Participants recruited from Loyola University Chicago's, Annual Family & School Partnership Program's Summer Institute

Year 1 (2015-16) Cohort 1

- 16 participants completed Time 1 interview; 11 consistently participated all year
- September 2015 – June 2016

Year 2 (2016-17) Cohort 1 & Cohort 2

- Cohort 1: 6 participants
- Cohort 2: 11 participants
- September 2016 – June 2017

The PLC Project

Monthly Workshops

- Evening, online meetings; Video conference format

- Co-led by PLC Leadership Team and PLC Participants

- 4 Part Focus:

    1. MTSS Case of a Trauma Informed School

    2. EBP / PBE capacity building

    3. Developing Tier 1 & 2 Interventions;

    4. Supporting participants in development, implementation & evaluation of school-based projects which they deemed most important

The PLC Project

"Mentor" Groups

- Year 1: 5 mentor groups, varied areas of practice
  - Monthly meetings to share practices, problem-solve, and support PLC participants' project goals
  - Facilitated by PLC Leadership Team members
- Year 2: 5 mentor groups, varied areas of practice
  - Same activities & structures EXCEPT meeting facilitated by Cohort 1 PLC Participants + PLC Leadership Team
  - Topics: 1) Tier 1 System Supports 2) Social Worker Support Roles 3) Parent / Community Supports 4) Restorative Practices & Promotion 5) Using Tier 2 Data

Research Questions

1. How do school mental health professionals view their roles, responsibilities, and leadership capacities in schools?

2. How does their participation in a 2 year professional learning community facilitate their leadership & professional capacity building efforts?

Methods

Mixed, Longitudinal Design (2 Year Study)

- Quantitative pre-post survey measures of: 1) EBP 2) Burnout 3) Professional Self-Efficacy

- Qualitative analysis of PLC experience
  - Interviews:
    - Year 1 (2015-16): Cohort 1 SSWs – T1, T2, T3 (+ Admins)
    - Year 2 (2016-17): Cohort 2 SMHP – T1, T2 (+ Admins)
  - Grounded Theory Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason 1996)
  - Analysis with Nvivo10 qualitative analysis software

Participants

- 11 active, Cohort 1
  - Participated in 5+ PLC workshops & completed 2+ interviews
- All female
  - 8 White; 2 African American; 1 Asian American
- Range of professional experience
  - 2 to 25+ years in school mental health
- Various school types
  - 7 Elementary/Middle Schools; 2 High School; 1 Both
  - Urban/majority low-income students (6)
  - Suburban/majority middle- to high-income students (5)

Analysis of Time 1 Interviews: Preliminary Themes

1. Professional Roles & Responsibilities

2. Tier 1 & 2 Advancement Efforts

3. Vision of Self as School Leader

4. Conditioning Factors That Impact Leadership Efforts

5. Hopes & Goals for the PLC Project

Professional Roles & Responsibilities

1. Tasks & Activities
   - Wide variation in SMH professionals' self-described roles:
     - Some described a heavy focus on Tier 3 interventions
     - Others worked across all 3 Tiers
   - However, this variation was not consistent across school type (elementary, middle, high school)
   - Some differences in day-to-day tasks depending on number of schools served by SMH worker
   - Translation: A unique cohort of participants, not typical of SSW in national surveys!

Professional Roles & Responsibilities

2. Leadership Roles & Committees

- Criteria for defining leadership roles:
    1. Sit on school-wide leadership committees;
    2. Develop and Lead Tier 1 & 2 Interventions in school;
    3. Being granted support by administration for autonomy in decision-making and intervention development beyond SPED
- Varied significantly, depending on how clear they believed the school descried a clear of vision for SMH
- Having a strong initiative in seeking leadership opportunities facilitated access to leadership roles

Tier 1 & 2 Advancement Efforts

- Limited PD Available for SMH Tier 1 & 2 Capacity Building

- Tier 1 & 2 Priorities & Goals Varied for 2015-16

  - Only 5 of 16 explicitly described individual professional goals that aimed to advance Tier 1 & 2 interventions in their schools

- Schools Themselves Varied Greatly in Vision for SMH

  - Only 7 of 16 described confidence in their schools' clarity of vision for school-wide SMH.

Tier 1 & 2 Advancement Efforts

Ms. S., High School SSW: Within the district, they pulled a couple people from each building and put on a training...[on restorative justice]...but they, essentially were like, 'here is this training, now go do it.' But there was no implementation. So, now, people are saying they are doing restorative justice but I'm like, 'you're not because that's not how you really do it.' Like... 'I had a peace circle.' Well, no, you really didn't. Because a peace circle is much more than you just, like...

Interviewer: Standing in a circle?

Ms. S.: Right...I mean, I had my boss send me to the peace circle training...down at Precious Blood...It was awesome. It was like four full days of circle training. So, I'm like, "how?..." No, like, you're not doing a circle with these kids....

Vision of Self as School Leader

Many SSWers were hesitant to envision themselves as providing "leadership" in their schools.

Instead, what was most salient in their work was:

1. Heavy workloads

2. A positive sense of professional self-efficacy with students, staff, and families alike

3. A desire to advocate for the most vulnerable student populations

4. Variation among participants in being knowledgeable of best-practices in the field of SMH

5. A worry about managing current and future burnout

Conditioning Factors That Impact Leadership Efforts

1. School factors *most cited* conditioning factors, specifically:

   - Principal support

   - How organized they perceived their school.

2. Individual factors *second-most cited*, specifically:

   – Self-efficacy and confidence on the job, followed by

   – Professional training, then self-care, then personal challenges.

3. District factors *least cited* conditioning factors.

Conditioning Factors That Impact Leadership Efforts

Limited Principal Support

"...in my school, there is no leadership possibility at all...it's all reactivity in the moment without without follow through...that's my biggest challenge right now is trying to work with a very ineffective leader."

Ms. D., Elementary SSW

School (Dis)Organization

"I feel like there's so many things that we can do differently...we have SO many bodies in this building...staff, like, ESPs which is security, at least five of them, whose role is to be on the floor, at all times...with 575 kids...we do not have to be as reactive as we are...we have so many bodies that we are definitely able to be proactive."

Ms. J., Elementary SSW

Conditioning Factors That Impact Leadership Efforts

Supportive Principal & Organized School

"[My assistant principal says...] 'My social worker is my right hand'...at my school, administration doesn't really have a lot of time to go in the classrooms or know what the hell is going on...I really get to see different views and different perspectives...like, social and emotional perspective of the students and, also, of like that perspective of what happens in the classroom and with teachers...she is really good about coming to me and be[ing] like, "look, this is what is going on with the student..." and then sends me to figure out how we can support...what is the root cause of what is happening.

Mrs. K., Elementary SSW

Hopes & Goals for the PLC Project

1. Greater Tier 1 & 2 Advancement

2. Develop Tier 3 Strategies

3. Clarity in SMH Role Articulation in Their School

4. Find Professional Community & Support in the PLC

Hopes & Goals for the PLC Project

"My PLC goal would be creating systematic Tier one services... really support teachers on those classroom behaviors and making sure that we're building the right classroom culture and climate...to give them tools and resources so that they can manage a bunch of behaviors on their own."

Ms. C., Elem/HS SSW

"I would love to...make myself just more accessible and relevant...I feel like I'm put kinda in this 'well you work with SPED kids' kind of box...I feel like these kids need skills; not just kids on their IEP...so much of what I help these kids with really should be taught to the larger class...making them all feel more integrated in part of a least restrictive environment."

Ms. M., Middle School SSW

PLC Project Experiences: Time 2 Emerging Themes

By time 2:

1. Participants expressed greatest satisfaction with:

    a. The degree of professional community and collegial support they were experiencing

    b. The professionally reflective & focused structure of the PLC

    "I'm often just like going, going, going, and I do this PLC…I find that it helps me refocus on okay, 'here is what I need to do"…just being caught up in the day to day of this, I lose sight of those bigger picture things, that *this* is what I'm trying to accomplish."

    Angie, HS SSW

PLC Project Experiences:
Time 2 Emerging Themes

2. That enhancing / reframing EBP / PBE was effective for setting realistic, focused PLC Project goals.

"I think the book and the lesson on evidence-based practice was so valuable...the message is: 'take your own data...You have a lot of data at your fingertips, and it's how you use it, how comfortably you get using it, instead of you thinking you have to pull out the most fidelity off the shelf'"

PLC Project Experiences: Time 3 Emerging Themes

1. Participants who set goals to develop Tier 1 & 2 projects in their schools expressed the greatest satisfaction with their experiences in the PLC Project in year 1.

2. These same participants were more likely present their work at the Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work's Family School Partnership Summer Institute

Reflections & Future Analysis

- There is a growing need to provide sustained SSW professional development across all levels of schools' MTSS.

- PLC Project participants were uniquely motivated in seeking out this opportunity.

- Important questions remain about:

  1. How participant experiences in the PLC facilitated their leadership and capacity building efforts over two years?

  2. What school, individual & district factors conditioned their efforts?

  3. How the additional "peer mentor" model facilitated their efforts?

- Future analysis will highlight the accomplishments and challenges faced by participants across the two years of the PLC Project and how these lessons can inform the PD and leadership advancement of the field of SSW.

Activity: Advancing Leadership Through Local PLCs?

ACSSW identifies FIVE Standards which school social workers should use to guide our leadership efforts in school.

1. *Education* - Promote Student Achievement and / or Student Development

2. *Mental Health* - Improve & Advance Student Mental Health & School Culture

3. *Systems* - Engage in Systems Improvement: Policies, Initiatives & Practices

4. *Professional Responsibilities* - Promote Professional Ethics, Behavior, Learning & Engagement

5. *Social Justice* - Advocate for Social Justice & Equity

(ACSSW, 2016)

Activity: Advancing Leadership Through Local PLCs?

With a partner, discuss the following (and/or note on index cards):

1. What themes jump out to you from the PLC Project?

2. Does the PLC Project inform the ACSSW standards in any way? If yes, how?

3. Thinking about your own school, district, local university partners, could a PLC Project be replicated in your district? What would be needed to support it?

A Parting Thought…
Making SSW Visible, Viable & Valued?

Essex, Yamano & Rippey Massat (2016) argue that to make social work in schools *visible, viable and valued…*

- We must:

  - 1) be at the school leadership table, and

  - 2) leading policy development and decision making at our schools.

How do we seek our / develop training opportunities to build capacity in these areas?

Questions?

Thank you!

Andrew Brake
Northeastern Illinois University
a-brake@neiu.edu

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