Empowering Professional Learning Communities' Coordinators in Higher Education and Public Schools

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Abstract (250 words)

Following research highlighting the importance of the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) coordination, the purpose of this interpretive case study is to comparatively describe the PLC coordinators' roles in two educational contexts: higher education and public schools in Cyprus. We comparatively examine how PLC coordinators perceived their roles, we compare their strategies and their challenges. We also investigated the support provided for these coordinators via facilitating and training. We analyzed data collected through (i) the PLC coordinators reflections and reports throughout a year; (ii) in-depth focus interviews at the end of the year; (iii) reflections of the facilitators; and (iv) the videotaped facilitators debriefing bi-weekly reflective discussions. Findings revealed a number of insights related to both similarities and differences between the two different educational contexts. Similarities included understanding of the notion the coordinators' flexibility and adaptation. Differences seemed to be related to the characteristics of the two educational contexts. We discuss lessons learned in an effort to empower PLC coordinators and support PLC sustainability in different contexts.

Theoretical framework (200 words)

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is a form of professional development referring to groups of teachers/instructors with shared interests and visions that meet regularly, exchange professional expertise, and work collaboratively for improving their teaching (e.g., Margalef & Roblin, 2016).

Research has long highlighted the central role of coordinating PLC's work. The role of a PLC coordinator is critical in building and maintaining focus on priorities, relationships and trust, coordinating teachers'/instructors collaborative work and acting as a leader to support the group's work to generate knowledge about their own teaching (e.g., Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011; Margalef & Roblin, 2016).

Although there are studies regarding PLCs in primary and secondary education, and to a lesser extent in higher education (e.g., Laws, 1996), there are no comparative studies on the role of PLC coordinators in different educational contexts or on their empowerment through facilitation and training.

In this study, school PLC coordinators are supported by facilitators that act as external critical friends, whereas in the higher education context, PLC coordinators are supported via internal facilitation and training.

Purpose (50 words)

This interpretive multi-case study seeks to develop descriptions of the roles of the PLC coordinators in two educational contexts: higher education and public schools in Cyprus. We comparatively examined how PLC coordinators perceived their roles, compared their strategies and challenges, and investigated the support provided for these coordinators.

Methods (150 words)

Data were collected through the coordinators' reflections and reports throughout their work over a year, and through in-depth focus interviews at the end of the year. We also collected reflections of the PLCs facilitators supporting PLC coordinators in each educational context, and their debriefing discussions during bi-weekly reflective meetings.

As a first analytic step, data collected from each of the two cases were analyzed separately in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the coordinators' roles in each case, the strategies they used, and the challenges experienced. As a second step, the different case descriptions were then brought together to facilitate comparison across cases, as part of the biweekly meetings of the facilitators supporting the PLC coordinators. Based on this process, common patterns, and different ways of manifestation of these patterns, but also unique instances were sought through a case study-based constant comparison approach.

Findings (200 words)

Our findings suggest a number of common issues. Flexibility and adaptation seem to be important common threads for the coordinators. Coordinators adopted elements that helped them act in a flexible way, based on their understanding of the PLC's complex characteristics, as well as their ideas of leveraging and adapting a variety of tools that they were prepared to use through their facilitation and training. For that, reflection before, during, and after PLC meetings played a key role in guiding flexibility and adaptation and was differentiated on depth and context. Also, data showed that coordinators acted as leaders who took initiative and action to promote the PLC work.

We have also identified a number of differences in the roles of the coordinators' context (e.g., collaboration with the headteacher in the case of schools, and autonomous work of academics). We also identified differences related to the degree of PLCs participants' response to facilitation and training. For instance, focusing reflection on student data was much easier to probe in some groups. Further, the idea of leaving a PLC meeting with a particular task to do was influenced by other tasks incorporated into the coordinators' regular work (e.g., teaching responsibilities, and reading the literature).

Discussion (100-250 words)

Lessons learned from this comparative study suggest that empowering PLC coordinators in both education contexts needs to focus on providing regular opportunities for them to get prepared for coordinating their PLC meetings, learn about new tools that can support their role, and reflect with peer coordinators on strategies employed and solutions applied. Also, evidence showed that the role of facilitators and the role of coordinators are complementary and intersect as interrelated roles that interact and reflect with one another.

The systematic effort to empower PLC coordinators, applied in the case of public schools in Cyprus, is an important initiative for promoting sustainable learning communities. Therefore, good evidence of the coherent way of training and supporting coordinators through tools, experiential and reflective activities is a paradigm that can be adopted in the context of higher education. Furthermore, the higher education paradigm of establishing a PLC that includes coordinators and facilitators, as a double-decker approach, worked as leverage for the function of the individual PLCs. Similarly, finding ways to sustain the PLCs of both facilitators and coordinators might be a promising practice for public schools as well.

Exploring how PLC coordinators perceive and enact their roles, the strategies they employ, and the actions they take in order to face challenges, is an area that still needs further investigation. Also, the role of the interaction between facilitators and coordinators, in the two contexts, needs to be studied in depth towards the creation of sustainable learning communities.

References (up to 3)

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