

School-based Professional Learning Communities for teachers' actions and practices empowerment in Cyprus education system

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Abstract

Teachers' professional learning approaches, in the centralized public educational system of Cyprus, are taking steps towards the creation of school-based Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a more effective and participatory model. This paper aims to present features of the characteristics formed in schools that participated in a Teachers' Professional Learning Support Programme in 2021-2022. Data was collected from 104 teachers via an online questionnaire. Analysis showed the characteristics that teachers value most within PLCs and the elements that were taken into consideration for implementing actions and practices based on the school needs assessment. It also revealed differences between teachers at different school types. Policy implications regard the support of PLCs towards more effective ways for promoting teachers' professional learning.

The context

Teachers' professional learning in Cyprus has experienced a reform, after the Ministry of Education, had set teachers' professional learning as a policy priority. In 2015 and 2017, two Council of Ministers' decisions, established policies for improving the quality of teacher education shifting towards more effective and participatory models of teachers' professional learning and development (Kennedy, 2014), led by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute. According to the new policy, the school is the core of teachers' professional learning, where it is expected a teachers' professional learning action plan to be designed, implemented and integrated in the wider school improvement plan. In this framework, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI), as the official body for teachers' learning and training, every year offers the opportunity to a limited number of schools on a voluntary basis, to work with a CPI facilitator and follow an inquiry-based professional learning methodology. Teachers are encouraged to collaborate and to work in joint actions, such as lesson planning and co-teaching, and they are supported to reflective thinking on their practices, activities and goals (e.g. Beauchamp, 2015). Based on the size of the school and the number of teaching staff, subgroups of teachers are formed as collaboration networks within the school (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010) aiming to develop Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

Professional Learning Communities

PLCs have been a promising low-stakes pathway for school-based teachers' professional learning to improve the school (e.g. Antinluoma et al, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). In PLCs, groups of teachers share and critically research their practices in a collaborative and learning-oriented mode through focused discussions, decision making, action and reflection (Gore & Rosser, 2020). PLCs influence teachers' satisfaction, self-sufficiency and their ability to collect and analyze data, reduce teachers' sense of isolation, and contribute to the creation of

a collective culture for high-quality teaching practice, enhancing the overall capacity of the school organization (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Woodland, 2016).

The evolution of a professional learning community is gradual, through stages (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). It is not an end in itself, nor is it a "technical project" or a renaming of existing structures (Welsh Government, 2011). It is a transformation process that connects community practices to classroom practice. A cyclical path gradually leads to the formation and formulation of collective structured dialogue and practices (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). Collective dialogue focuses on reflecting and highlighting each member of the community both as a personality and as a professional (Antinluoma et al, 2018).

Schools that function as professional learning communities have differentiated characteristics both organizationally and functionally. They are organized on the basis of trust and professional collegiality, around subgroups that act as critical friends with each other in search of best practices to meet their students' needs (Spratt, 2019). The creation of a positive school climate is crucial for the implementation of PLCs as it affects change readiness (Antinluoma et al, 2018). In PLCs collaboration perceives unique content, since the school becomes a collaborative space "where ideas belong to the group and where learning is promoted and valued" (Patton & Parker, 2017, p. 359) and this meaningful and effective collaboration is strategically planned, in the direction of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O' Connor, 2018).

When the complexity of the educational context is taken into account, interacting organizational, psychological, work and cultural factors are identified, such as leadership, collective autonomy, facilitative processes regarding space, time and group dynamics (Van Meeuwen et al, 2019). The interaction of all these factors create a "zone of proximal development" in which teachers as leaders become effective change agents (Smith, 2003; Turner et al, 2017) and PLCs are aligned with the school day-to-day work (Schaap & de Bruijin, 2018).

Towards this direction, it is necessary to focus on teachers as leaders and to the PLC external collaborators/facilitators in the Cyprus context and to explore and understand the way teachers' collaboration and interaction may be facilitated, how technicalities can be handled, and how the institutional framework can establish PLCs. In particular, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the following questions:

- What characteristics within PLCs do teachers in Cyprus value most?
- What elements do Cypriot teachers take into consideration for implementing practices and actions?

Methodology

Data was collected in June 2022 through an online questionnaire in the framework of a project funded by the Cyprus Research and Innovation Foundation. The five-part questionnaire focused on teachers' self-perceptions regarding the importance of PLC and their self-involvement, investigating characteristics of PLCs considered important, factors highlighted as important for teachers' decisions on implementing actions or practices, and structures and conditions of the school context leveraged to support PLCs.

The link for the online questionnaire was shared by the CPI facilitators, to teachers working in the participating schools for the school year 2021-2022. A total number of 104 teachers responded, from different types of schools. (Table 1 presents the respondents' profile.)

Table 1: *Respondents' Profile*

| Variables | Categories | N | % |
|-------------------------------------|---|----|------|
| Sex | Male | 18 | 17.3 |
| | Female | 82 | 78.8 |
| Type of school | Pre-primary Education | 12 | 11.5 |
| | Primary – Special Education | 39 | 37.5 |
| | Higher Education – Vocational Education | 49 | 47.1 |
| Age | <35 | 8 | 7.7 |
| | 36-45 | 45 | 43.3 |
| | 46-55 | 30 | 28.8 |
| | 56+ | 17 | 16.3 |
| Years of teaching experience | 1-5 | 25 | 24.0 |
| | 6-10 | 4 | 3.8 |
| | 11-15 | 18 | 17.3 |
| | 16-20 | 19 | 18.3 |
| | 21+ | 34 | 32.7 |
| Total number of teachers per school | 1-15 | 40 | 38.5 |
| | 16-25 | 13 | 12.5 |
| | 25+ | 47 | 45.2 |

Note: Missing values not included in sample sizes

Results

Data analysis (see Table 2) showed that the importance of PLC in teachers' school life was related to the following items: 1) importance of PL theme set as priority, 2) try new practices/actions, 3) in-site training on the PL theme set as priority, 4) effectiveness of practices/actions implemented, 5) high expectations to implement effective practices/actions (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Table 2: *Items related to the importance of PLC in teachers' school life*

Component Matrix^a

| | Component 1 |
|--|-------------|
| importance of PL theme set as priority | .900 |
| try new practices/actions | .842 |
| in-site training on the PL theme set as priority | .891 |
| effectiveness of practices/actions implemented | .743 |
| high expectations to implement effective practices/actions | .822 |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no different response mode regarding the importance of PLC for teachers working in different types of schools (pre-primary, primary or special school, higher or vocational school).

Findings also showed the characteristics of PLCs most valued by teachers (ranking shown in Figure 1). The most important characteristics were numbered from 1 to 5, while the two least important were numbered with 7. In Figure 1, the elements ranked with lower total values were considered as more important. Thus, trust, open communication, feeling of reinforcement in the group, opportunities to reflect on own practices and relevance to needs were ranked higher and were regarded as more important than the within-school supporting conditions and the composition of the group (e.g., teachers of different classes or subjects).

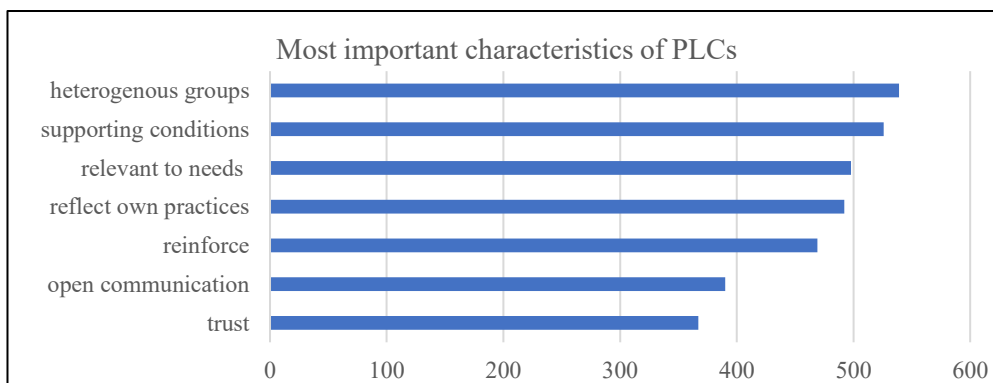


Figure 1: *Most important characteristics of PLCs*

Ranking elements that teachers consider when making decisions regarding teaching practices or actions in the PLC (Figure 2), showed that informally collected data about students and discussions with colleagues were the most important elements. Other elements such as within-school seminars, previous practices and collaboration with colleagues were also ranked as important. Information from parents/guardians or groups of other professionals was considered the least important item to affect teachers' decisions to act and implement teaching practices.

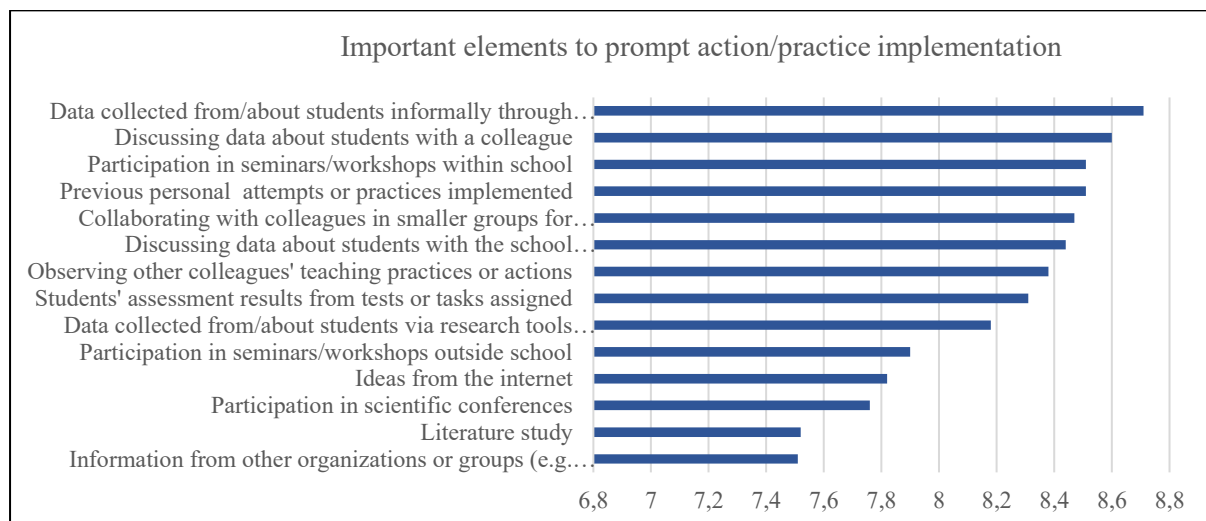


Figure 2: *Elements considered when making decisions regarding teaching practices or actions in the PLC*

The extent to which time was made available for PLC meetings and teachers' interaction was also investigated. Both common time for coordination and regular time during staff meetings

were found to be positively related to the importance of PLC in teachers' daily school life ($\rho=.36$, $p<.05$ and $\rho=.28$, $p<.05$ respectively). Pairwise comparisons showed significant differences between pre-primary teachers and teachers from other types of schools in regard to the leverage of common time for coordination and regular time during staff meetings. Further investigation will be conducted on the role of time in different types of schools.

Discussion

The implementation of the new teacher professional learning policy in Cyprus aims to promote the creation of PLCs within schools, and support teachers learning through active participation and reflection. Participating teachers' self-perceptions highlight important features of the PLCs and a number of elements that prompt their decisions to implement practices and actions, pointing towards a comprehensive context and plan for their professional learning (Antinluoma et al, 2018). For building a comprehensive context for productive PLCs, these important elements need to be taken into account, in search for the best possible ways to support teachers' practices that are linked to data-driven decision making arising from personal and/or group reflection. The role of the PLC facilitator should be further explored in supporting teachers' reflection to create links between informally and formally collected data, theory and practice and other stakeholders' perceptions (i.e. parents). There is need to create an appropriate knowledge base available to use evidence and different perspectives (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018) in close cooperation with teachers and facilitators as well as to enhance and motivate access to PLC tools (DuFour, 2007).

In this context, structural factors and small group dynamics should be considered, as teachers' involvement and discussions enhance learning while creating space and regularity of time to meet and reflect are crucial factors for the implementation of PLCs (Day et al, 2016; Hairon & Tan, 2017). Making time available by managing daily timetable needs to be a priority and further study would shed light to the ways different schools experiment with organizing daily schedules and practicalities handling to maximize time and interaction. PLCs are forms of long-term improvement and a strategy for systematic change as "part-and-parcel" of teachers' day-to-day sociocultural practice and identity (Feger & Alluda, 2008). Results in the study showed that it would be enlightening to investigate how subgroups of teachers may be formed within schools, how the members of smaller groups interact, and in which ways the role of teacher-leaders could be reinforced in those groups, where trustful collaboration and group loyalty will guide TPL from within. The challenge is to improve the quality of work, moving in the direction of collaborative professionalism (DeWitt, 2017; Hargreaves & O' Connor, 2018), taking into account that a number of factors, such as collegial interaction and trust, are ranked high and seem in place for a PLC.

As education contexts are bounded by their own social norms and rules, teachers in Cyprus seem to be able to play a variety of roles to provide the structural and cultural support to nurture PLCs (Prenger et al, 2019) and improve school and classroom practice together, over time, in trustful relationships.

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