

School-based Professional Learning Communities in a centralized educational system

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Abstract

Teachers' Professional Learning approaches, in the centralised 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 study aims to investigate the characteristics within PLCs and elements that Cyprus teachers take into consideration for implementing practices and actions. Data was collected via questionnaires and interviews with teachers, as part of a funded project. Findings showed that trust, open communication, feeling of reinforcement in the group are some valuable characteristics of PLCs. Empowering teachers as leaders and coordinators and creating time slots dedicated to discussion, interaction and reflection emerged, to see how in the context and characteristics of a centralised educational system can contribute to a PLC culture. Policy implications regard the support of PLCs towards more autonomous and effective ways for teachers' professional learning.

Summary

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).

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. 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 in providing the structural and cultural support to nurture PLCs (Prenger et al, 2019) and improve school and classroom practice together, over time, in trustful relationships. PLCs have been a promising pathway for school-based teachers' professional learning to improve the school (e.g., Antinluoma et al, 2018), influence teachers' satisfaction, self-sufficiency, 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).

Aims

In the Cyprus context, the aim is to explore and understand the way teachers' collaboration and interaction can be facilitated, how technicalities can be handled, and how the institutional framework can establish PLCs in the centralised context. In particular, the purpose of this study 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?

Methods

Data was collected through an online questionnaire and focus group interviews 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. A total number of 104 teachers responded, from different types of schools. Interviews were also conducted with selected teachers (N=6) in order to understand more PLCs characteristics and elements for implementing practices and actions.

Findings

Data analysis (Table 1) 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). 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 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). Qualitative findings also showed that teachers value working within a trustful collaborative context, where opportunities for reflection are enhanced.

'Watch the action [lesson]...do their reflection, teach...and again a new reflection [...] For reflection, everyone's participation was also very important [...] "built" on reflection and moved forward.' (T1)

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. Qualitative data also highlighted the importance of discussions and exchange of ideas and practices among teachers.

'And one [teacher] says, "I haven't managed to do this yet. How did you do this? Let's do it like this. Did you succeed when you did it?"' (T2)

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.

'We often use the weekly staff meetings [...] we spend ten minutes regularly, to give feedback, to exchange ideas, and we also discuss during breaktimes and non-teaching time.' (T3)

Tables and Charts

Table 1: *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.

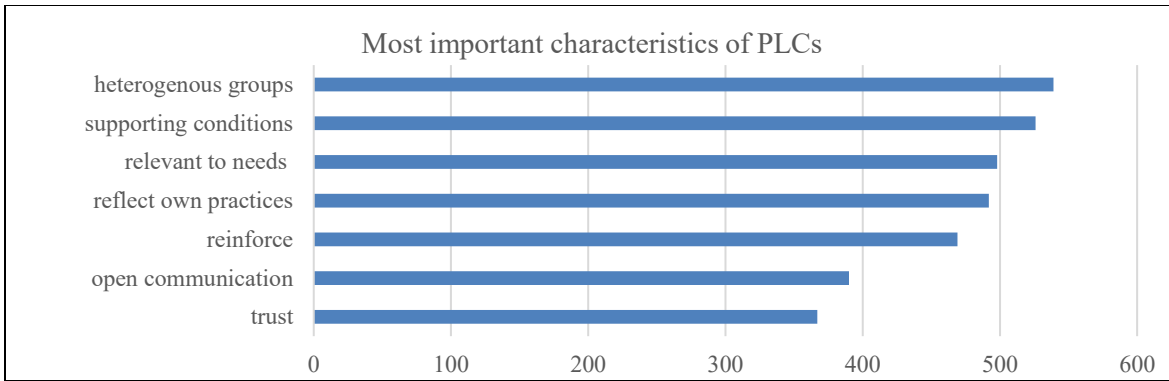


Figure 1: *Most important characteristics of PLCs*

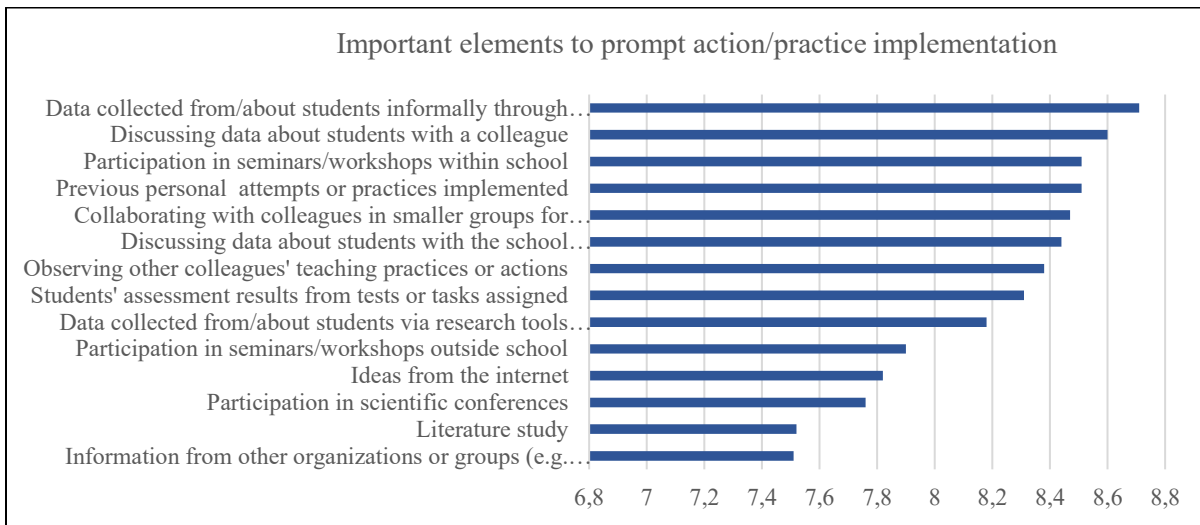


Figure 2: *Elements considered when making decisions regarding teaching practices or actions in the PLC*

Theoretical and educational significance

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. This study sheds light on how PLCs can emerge and develop in a centralized system. The creation of a positive school climate is crucial for the implementation of PLCs as it affects change readiness (Antinluoma et al, 2018).

References

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