A case study of faculty Professional Learning Communities in higher education

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Theoretical Framework

This is a descriptive case study (Yin, 2017) seeking to provide detailed descriptions of the ways two groups of instructors in a University in Cyprus engaged in two faculty Professional Learning Communities (fPLCs) throughout the academic year 2022-2023, specifically focusing on the characteristics of fPLC work. We analyze evidence from these two case studies to comparatively describe how the work in these fPLCs looked, seeking to describe facets of the fPLC work and characteristics that were deemed productive and supportive, as well as aspects that seemed to be related to challenges faced during the work of the fPLCs. Data were collected as part of a funded project that aimed to investigate the characteristics of productive and sustainable faculty PLCs., Our evidence suggests insights for supporting sustainable fPLCs in higher education (e.g., Laws, 1996).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a form of professional development that provides teachers/instructors a framework in which to act as "learners" and schools/institutions as "learning communities" (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). PLCs refer to small teams (communities) of teachers/instructors with shared interests and visions that meet regularly, exchange expertise, and work collaboratively with the goal of improving their teaching practice (Brookhart, 2009; Margalef & Roblin, 2016). In the context of PLCs, professional learning should be an ongoing, sustained, intensive, and collaborative approach to improving teachers'/instructors' effectiveness in raising student achievement (Slabine, 2011) and enhancing student learning experiences. This engagement provides teachers/instructors with opportunities to refine their content knowledge and teaching pedagogies and approaches, understand the need to change, and helps them find ways to implement changes in their teaching that will help their students to learn more effectively (e.g., Fishman et al., 2003; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2003).

Although a recently growing number of studies have investigated the use and function of PLCs at primary and secondary education levels, there is to date relatively little investigation of PLCs in higher education (e.g., Laws, 1996). Cox (2004) indicates that faculty PLCs (fPLCs) can play an important role in faculty development with evidence suggesting that both student and faculty learning is improved through this process. In a study exploring the potential introduction of fPLCs as an innovative way to enhance instructors' teaching competencies, Authors (2023) have described new directions in fPLCs, focusing more on peer interaction and support, and student data focusing on learning outcomes aligned with the increasing research interest in the field (e.g., Terry, et al., 2018). In a sense, engaging faculty in fPLC practices may be a way to further empower faculty in their working environment. Overall, there is to date very little evidence of whether these changes are sustained or can be sustainable beyond participation in fPLCs (Tinnell et al., 2019). The growth of this idea has been slow, and there seem to be many obstacles to implementation (Palmer, 2002), with Authors (2023) asking for further, more detailed investigations related to fPLC work and impact.

Methods

This study is part of a larger project funded through the Cyprus Research and Innovation Foundation seeking to investigate the characteristics of productive and sustainable PLCs.

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Following a descriptive case study approach (Yin, 2017), this study involved two groups of instructors at a University in Cyprus (5 and 8 faculty members in each group respectively) working in two fPLCs. The first fPLC consisted of instructors in the undergraduate program of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Their specialization covered a wide range of education fields (i.e., early childhood pedagogies, teacher training, mathematics education, science education, music education). The coordinator (second author) had also a formal education background and long-standing research interests related to reflection and professional learning in education. She was also the program coordinator of the ECE undergraduate program. The second fPLC consisted of instructors in the undergraduate program of Pharmacy. The participants' specialization covered a wide range of scientific fields (i.e., chemistry, physics, pharmacy, botany, pharmaceutical technology and analysis). The coordinator (third author) had a background in Chemistry. She was also the program coordinator of the Pharmacy undergraduate program.

Data for this study consisted of personal interviews with the fPLC participants of the two fPLCs selected. The two groups were selected strategically, as they were indicated by participants as very successful. At the same time, the first fPLC consisted of instructors with backgrounds in Education Sciences, whereas the second consisted of instructors with backgrounds in Sciences. We felt that the comparison of the two groups would provide us with useful insights into the way these fPLCs worked and the challenges they faced.

As part of the larger project, an interview protocol was developed by the scientific team of the project based on the PLC literature as well as the long-term experience of the members in supporting PLCs over a number of years. Each interview had a duration of about 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the research assistant of the project and were videotaped and transcribed for analysis. Using discourse-based approaches and open coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin,1998) we analyzed all primary data, looking for characteristics in faculty work within the PLCs. All data were analyzed by all three authors independently and discussed to resolve any differences. From the analysis, we identified a number of emerging themes that we describe below.

Findings

Participants highlighted the fact that they shared a sense of multifaced uniformity. The first facet of uniformity was related to the fact that all fPLC members taught in the same program. This resulted in a collaborative culture during the fPLCs meetings. This culture pre-existed prior to the formation of the fPLCs, but was reinforced by the participation in the fPLCs.

A second facet of uniformity was related to the fact that both fPLC coordinators were also the coordinators of the respective programs. Both coordinators were in a long-lasting collaboration with all the members of their fPLC, although this was mostly on a one-on-one basis for fPLC1.

A difference between the two fPCLs was the identification by the members of fPLC2 of the need to have group members with different backgrounds, possibly educational. They they felt that the uniformity of their group prevented them from getting better insights into the challenges they identified and investigating possible solutions.

A second difference was related to the operational aspects of the fPLCs. The participants described the work of fPLC1 as a scientific process that was based on a repeated process of reflecting on data collected from all the members' teaching practices and the implementation

of actions designed and discussed during the meetings. On the other hand, the work of fPLC2 could be described more as technical, using tools and processes provided to enhance the work of the group, possibly pointing to the fact that the coordinator did not have any prior formal knowledge related to pedagogical issues or the work and function of PLCs.

Reflection was also different in the two groups. Reflection time in fPLC1 was an official part of the meeting, and it was designed to be a more formal, collective process. In fPLC2, reflection was more an informal, less explicit process.

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