Designing activities for enhancing teachers' professional learning communities in Cyprus

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The background

During the last decade Cyprus followed worldwide efforts to raise standards of achievement for all students through school reforms. One aspect of this reform was a new policy for continuous teachers' professional learning (TPL) in public schools, that aimed to provide opportunities for professional learning to all teachers in a systematic way which will be based on a needs assessment for both the school and the individual teachers. The new TPL policy was based on theoretical underpinnings that support the need to work towards action and reflection, networking and teachers' autonomy and to make efforts to move from transmissive to transformational forms of teachers' professional learning (Kennedy, 2014; Zehetmeier et al, 2015).

Based on two ministerial decisions in 2015 and 2017, the new policy focuses on TPL within schools, and all schools are expected to develop their professional learning action plan and set a school TPL coordinator. A small number of schools of all levels of educations (40-50 schools per year) can opt to work on their TPL action plan in cooperation with a facilitator, who acts as a critical friend, by participating to the Professional Learning Support Programme (PLSP) offered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI). The PLS Programme focuses on creating and sustaining a Professional Learning Community as a mode of more transformative form of in-site TPL (Timperley et al, 2018).

Professional Learning Communities and the Professional Learning Support Programme of the CPI

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are groups of teachers who share and critically explore their practices in a collaborative and learning-oriented way, through focused discussions, decision-making, action and reflection (Gore & Rosser, 2022). PLCs develop incrementally as a transformative process that connects community practices to classroom practice (Mclaughlin & Talbert, 2006), and are not a simple renaming of existing structures (Welsh Government, 2011). Schools who function as PLCs align the work of the PLC with the daily work of the school (Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018), are organized around trust and professional collegiality (Sprott, 2019; Antinluoma et al, 2018). They constitute spaces "where ideas belong to the group and where learning is promoted and valued" (Patton & Parker, 2017, p. 359) and where collaboration is strategically planned and is meaningful and effective towards collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

Thus, schools that participate in the PLS Programme offered by the CPI, follow the stages of action research methodology (Eracleous et al, 2022), which is combined with other inquiry-based methodologies, such as Lesson Study (Lewis, 2016) and Quality Teaching Rounds (Gore et al, 2015), to address the issue they set as a priority more comprehensively (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The aim is to support PLCs to shape 'zones of proximal development' in which teachers as leaders become effective agents of change (Smith, 2003; Turner et al, 2017).

For the creation and evolution of PLCs, the role of the in-school coordinators is very important, as they are called to interact with the school head, the CPI facilitator and their colleagues, to design, implement and reflect on a shared vision that the group sets as

a priority. Therefore, supporting in-school PLC coordinators in their role to act as teacher leaders and enable PLCs in their schools is important.

Aim of the study

This study, which was conducted in the framework of the "PLCs for us" project, funded by the Research and Innovation Foundation, aimed to support in-school PLC coordinators (working in schools which participated to the PLS Programme) via designing and/or selecting, evaluating and (re)formulating a set of activities (Toolkit). The activities should be suitable and effective a) for PLC coordinators' training, and b) as a set of tools that can be implemented in schools for creating and evolving a PLC.

Methodology

The Iterative Design Process (Cobb et al, 2015) was used, following a cyclical process of activity design and/or selection, application, evaluation and reformulation. Activities were selected or designed based on PLC coordinators' needs, focusing on promoting collaborative work of colleagues for co-creating a meaningful professional learning framework and raising students' learning (Antinluoma et al, 2018). A pool of activities and tools had already been applied since 2014 under the Professional Learning Support Program of the CPI, but new activities and tools were also designed or selected and applied during "PLCs for us" project implementation. Design and/or selection of activities and tools to be piloted was based on data from reflective diaries kept by 4 CPI facilitators, who acted as critical friends in 10 schools of all levels of education during 2022-2023 (4 reflective diaries per school).

Design and/or selection of activities/tools

The design and selection of activities was based on three pillars:

- Time, following major stages of action research methodology
- PLC characteristics, as described in literature (Nehring & Fitzsimmons, 2011; Sprott, 2019)
- Specific goals of each PLC (De Neve & Devos, 2017; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hairon & Tan, 2017; Hargreaves & O' Connor, 2018; Leclerc et al, 2012; Stoll et al, 2006)

Qualitative data analysis of the reflective diaries revealed three major categories/dimensions for effective evolution of a PLC:

- Culture and collegiality
- Structure and handling of technicalities
- Reflection

Each activity/tool aimed to address current needs for promoting one or more of those three dimensions. A fourth dimension was also revealed (named "conceptual" dimension), which permeated all time phases of the PLCs, as teachers deepened their learning and proceeded to design and implementation of actions.

Different types of activities/tools were applied and piloted (experiential activity, tool/instrument, checklist), at different phases of the development and work of a PLC (e.g. to address needs assessment, to promote understanding of the perspective of others, to elevate reflection on actions implemented) and at different time periods (e.g. initiation and set-off of a PLC, PLC development at the middle of the school year, sustaining a PLC at the beginning of year 2). Most activities were piloted at schools by PLC facilitators (11), some were applied during training meetings for PLC coordinators (4) and at schools by PLC coordinators (2).

Evaluation and (re)formulation of activities/tools

Data collection for evaluation and (re)formulation of activities was made via an online short questionnaire for PLC coordinators after each training meeting (43 PLC coordinators, who had 4 training meetings in 2022-2023). Also, the four CPI facilitators completed an online short questionnaire after each application of an activity in the schools they collaborated with (ten schools of all levels of education in total), and interviews were conducted with three PLC coordinators were, two head teachers and three teachers from those ten schools at the second half of the school year. Analysis was organized and structured based on three axes: usefulness for the PLC group needs; response to activity; suggestions to use (adapted) activity with another group/PLC.

Findings

Findings showed that the activities met teachers' or PLC coordinators' needs at a high level and a high level of satisfaction. Also, activities were found to be closely related to a PLC framework for active teachers and schools (Margalef & Robins, 2016). Data also revealed the importance of the PLC leadership (head teachers and PLC coordinators) in generating knowledge and reflective thinking about teaching (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011).

Data showed that adaptations of the activities/tools were made prior application, based on each PLC context, in order to best address the specific needs. In some cases, when the participants faced difficulties in responding, facilitators made immediate adaptations to help teachers participate actively. Findings stress the need for flexibility in adapting activities to the school context.

Discussion-Conclusions

Activities, tools and instruments may promote the creation and development of PLCs, as they gradually evolve towards collective, structured dialogue and practices (Mclaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). Activities, tools and instruments are needed to help collective dialogue within a PLC, focusing on reflection and the emergence of each community member as both a person and a professional (Antinluoma et al, 2018). As findings reveal, there is a need to revisit the role of the school head teachers in enhancing teacher leadership in PLCs via the implementation of activities and use of tools/instruments.

Also, the new TPL policy in Cyprus seems to focus on "decentralized-centralism" as a state agency of TPL (Lee & Lee, 2018) and may promote inquiry-based and school-based learning for teachers and the creation of PLCs (Eracleous et al, 2022). Through structured activities, tools and instruments, PLCs may function as a springboard for learning for change and enable the experience of activation as decision making and action, using knowledge, experience and competence in making meaningful learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

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