

# Empowering Educators Through Professional Learning Communities

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## Introduction

With the increased revolutions in educational pedagogy, the role of an educationist is no longer limited to mere knowledge transfer. There are numerous demands placed on a teacher. To remain abreast of the modern means of teaching and learning, a teacher is expected to engage in continuous professional development (PD) activities. Teacher education and professional development are impacted by globalization and professionalization. These fast-paced changes often exacerbate the teacher's need for control and certainty (Ben-Peretz, 2001). Overwhelmed by the demands of the teaching workload, teachers also often find themselves lacking in time to engage in PD activities. While some professional development activities require a formal setting, a designated instructor, and outlined course material, others are more informal.

The intended outcome of any teaching and learning activity is to increase student achievement. Planning student-centred lessons, implementing activity-based learning, designing varied forms of assessment, taking the role of an advisor and a mentor to address the affective needs of students, collaborating with parents, evaluating one's teaching practices, and making necessary adjustments are all done to ensure that students' learning experiences are maximized, and their achievement is improved. However, none of this may be fruitful if the institution lacks a collaborative environment. Over the past few decades, there has been increased attention towards the concept of collaboration among teachers and its connection with student accomplishment (Mora-Ruano et al., 2019). An important model that promotes collaboration and fosters professional association among teachers is the professional learning communities (PLCs) model. The advantages of PLCs often outweigh the constraints of time and the pressure of workload. Engaging in a professional learning community enables teachers to interact effectively with lead practitioners. This collaborative activity not only improves subject knowledge but also helps educators brainstorm new strategies and ideas applicable in the classroom to maximize learning and, ultimately, student achievement (Patzner, 2020).

## Problem Statement

The importance of teacher collaboration has been established through numerous research studies; however, various factors hinder the effective implementation of these collaborative measures. The problem identified for this research paper is the lack of collaboration among the secondary school teachers at an International School located in the United Arab Emirates.

## Proposed Solution

The proposed solution to address this problem is the introduction of a professional learning community program that would offer teachers the chance to cooperate, collaborate, and share ideas to develop the learning capabilities of students across the secondary school. This initiative will be introduced through the change management plan.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research paper is to provide detailed insight into the proposed initiative, i.e., the introduction of professional learning communities, in light of the available literature. The paper further identifies the different phases of the change management plan and the steps that will be taken to implement the change while identifying and catering to any barriers that may arise. Lastly, the paper outlines the means to evaluate this newly implemented change.

## The Initiative – Literature Review

The most critical element for the advancement of instructional quality and enhancement of student learning is the professional learning activities that teachers engage in (Campbell et al., 2016; Shirrell et al., 2019). These activities range from formal PD, i.e., workshops and courses, to other job-embedded PD, i.e., mentoring and peer observation (Garet et al., 2001; Parise and Spillane, 2010). To bring about an instructional change in a teacher's practice, a mix of both formal and informal PD is required (Shirrell et al., 2019).

## Teacher Collaboration – Professional Learning Communities

Teacher collaboration is an important professional development tool. It can be defined as a structure that encourages teachers to continuously collaborate to attain the common goal of student learning enhancement. It involves collaboration for analyses and improvement of classroom practices (DuFour and Eaker, 2009). A professional learning community is an effective structure that promotes such collaboration. It enables educators to create a shared mission, vision statement, and a set of collective values. PLCs are characterized by teachers participating in collective inquiry to attain focused results. These learning communities are based on collaborative teams that are action-oriented to bring an improvement to classroom practices, thereby improving student achievement outcomes (McCarthy et al., 2011).

There is an escalating pressure of improving student achievement on school leaders and other

stakeholders involved. The collaborative model of professional learning communities enables all stakeholders to cooperate through a shared vision. It creates a common language and mutual practices and fosters conditions that are supportive of the professional growth of teachers. The role of school leaders is catalytic to the launch and sustenance of PLCs. Since teachers are increasingly accountable for student achievement, there is an immediate need to foster a collaborative culture in schools. This supportive environment helps teachers to become equipped with shared practices, thereby improving their own and others' capabilities (Jones-Goods, 2018). The quality of teaching imparted to students may cause a variance of approximately 30% in their performance. Teacher expertise and effectiveness are enhanced when they are offered the opportunity to collaborate (Hattie, 2015, 2003)

## Advantages of PLCs

In an essay written by Baruti Kafele, he identifies it as a troublesome fact that some educational institutes have no teacher collaboration programs in place, while in others, it is at a minimal level. This lack of collaborative culture is quite worrisome as schools often have some extraordinary educators, both old and new. However, working in a vacuum, each teacher is keeping their pedagogical knowledge and skills to themselves. Their presence in the school is of no benefit to other teachers. They are unable to share their unique experiences (2017). Therefore, in an environment where professional relations are majorly unilateral, innovation is an alien concept, and student achievement cannot be improved at all levels. In contrast, sharing resources, teaching strategies, and knowledge is often predictive of growth for students and the school.

The concept of PLC operates on the notion that professional development is not a separate entity. Rather, it is an organizational management strategy that ensures teacher improvement (Graham, 2007). Its underlying premise is that "the best staff development happens in the workplace, rather than in a workshop" (DuFour and Eaker, 2009). As an effective learning milieu, PLC has a positive effect on the acquisition of relevant skills and boosting the morale of staff members (Binkhorst et al., 2015).

Numerous research has proven the influence of professional learning communities on teacher performance and student educational outcomes (Vescio et al., 2008). A meta-analysis of eleven studies identified that teacher practice and student learning change through the implementation of PLCs. Similarly, research has demonstrated a positive impact of PLCs on a wide range of subjects, including mathematics, engineering, science, and technology (Fulton and Britton, 2011). In the context of secondary schools, a significant positive relationship has been established between learners' achievement and teachers' involvement in PLCs (Lomos et al., 2011). Professional learning communities not only enhance the pedagogical skills of teachers but also improve their disciplinary knowledge (Dogan et al., 2016). Moreover, a critical analysis of thirteen PLC studies confirmed the findings of previously conducted research by establishing that teachers who participate in professional learning communities are better equipped to better their practice and enhance student

achievement (Doğan and Adams, 2018).

## Characteristic Features of PLCs

There are at least five elements that are characteristic of an effective PLC. These include shared standards and values, a determined focus on learning, and de-privatization of strategies. Moreover, an emphasis on collaboration and engaging in reflective dialogues are features of an effective PLC (Binkhorst et al., 2015). A professional learning community cannot flourish if its members are devoid of dedication and do not put in intentional efforts to learn from each other, engage in reflective dialogues, and exchange meaningful experiences (Fuller et al., 2005).

The formation of professional learning communities is based on three important characteristics. These include the group characteristics, the learning process, and the learning outcomes. It is through the interaction of these three elements that PLCs develop (Mittendorff et al., 2006). Group characteristics constitute the composition of people that form the group, the overall group atmosphere, and the learning culture developed within the group. Secondly, collaborative activities are the various actions that the PLC members take regarding the students and the school. These actions are aligned with the intended purpose of the PLC. Lastly, the outcomes are the common goals that the PLC members set for each individual and the collective improvement of the school (Schaap and de Bruijn, 2018).

The research identifies specific elements for the development of PLCs in schools. These include a shared vision, reflective dialogues, and engagement in collaborative activities. These specific elements constitute the collective learning context of the community (Brouwer et al., 2012). Additionally, research indicates that stability and ownership are highly important for the development of a PLC. This stability and ownership transcend from the school principal and must be a part of the ethos of the staff members engaged in the collaborative activities. Aligning the PLC's outcome with the teachers' needs and the level of initiative each member takes is central to the development of a successful professional learning community (Schaap and de Bruijn, 2018; Stoll et al., 2006).

Although the advantages of professional learning communities are evident through research, if incorrectly administered, these PLCs may focus on common experiences and stifle innovation, thereby failing to achieve the intended results (Miller, 2020). It is, therefore, important that PLC is introduced through an effective change management plan which follows the identified phases, overcomes barriers, and evaluates outcomes. The following section of this paper outlines the context in which PLC will be introduced, along with the steps of the change management plan and the evaluative measures.

## Context

The context of the implementation of this change management plan is an international school in the United Arab Emirates. It is an International Baccalaureate continuum school that follows the Middle

Year Programme (MYP) and the Diploma Programme (DP) at the secondary level. Since there is no teacher collaboration at the secondary level, the change management plan aims to introduce professional learning communities. This plan aims to offer teachers a structure through which they can collaborate and share ideas to improve students' learning skills across the secondary school.

## Implementing the Change

The change management plan that can cater to the identified problem of a lack of collaboration among teachers is the introduction of PLCs. A change management plan follows a structured approach and serves as a roadmap that outlines the various steps an institute must take to execute the intended change. A change management plan is often executed in three phases: preparation for change, managing the change, and sustaining outcomes (Gillingham, 2021). The initiative to introduce PLC in the school would not be a linear process, rather it would follow a cyclic process of learning. To become a successful learning team, the members of the PLC must engage in a cyclic process of analyzing data and setting goals embedded in this data. This is followed by engaging in individual and collaborative learning activities, implementing the new learning, and lastly, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting practices (Miller, 2020).

In an organization where PLC must be introduced as a new initiative, seven important steps can be identified which can prepare the school for the PLC. These steps are as follows:

- Identify the opportunity for change
- Share a common purpose
- Outline concrete plans for change
- Develop trust
- Inspire shared leadership
- Study the Impact
- Commemorate success

For each of these steps, certain key questions must be addressed, and strategies must be implemented, which are outlined below:

## Identify the Opportunity for Change

This is the first step towards the introduction of a professional learning community. It involves an analysis of the students' outcomes data, which informs school leaders and teachers about students' learning growth. It enables the key stakeholders to address the key question: how effective are the current practices? This self-assessment is key to identifying gaps in current practices and developing a preliminary plan. At this beginning stage, the school teams will identify their altered roles within a PLC. The role of reflective dialogue is extremely important at this stage as this inquiry learning helps in a greater understanding of the problem (Mercer, 2008).

## Share a Common Purpose

A shared vision identifies the purpose of the PLC. It addresses the key question: what values, behaviours, and practices should we as a school adopt? The communication of a collective vision is an important collaborative step whereby all members coordinate to outline a purpose statement. It may involve asking individuals to come up with their statements and aligning them with the shared vision. Once a clear vision is outlined, it must be shared with the wider school community. Following this, all actions must be planned to realize the vision. A shared vision develops a sense of purpose and has an evident role in school improvement (Lomos et al., 2011).

## Outline Concrete Plans for Change

The third step of this change management plan is to give a concrete structure to the intended change. This step would involve planning the PLC meetings by deciding about issues such as the suitable time for PLC meetings. This step would address the key question: how should the school structure professional learning activities to optimize learning? Rather than bringing about drastic changes, it is always advisable to retain pre-existing structures that may complement the new initiative. This phase would involve reviewing the current meeting schedules, revising timetables, and publishing an agreed-upon meeting schedule for the PLC members.

## Develop Trust

This is one of the most important steps of creating a PLC and is central to ensuring stability and ownership. The most important key question at this stage is: how can we build trust within a PLC? While staff surveys and open communication can provide meaningful insight, it is imperative that a PLC openly shares its successes as well as failures. Additionally, nominating trusted individuals as instructional leaders can also be advantageous (Harris et al., 2013).

## Inspire Shared Leadership

Through a shared leadership strategy, school administrators can identify teachers with extraordinary skills and assign them the role of instructional leaders. For running a PLC, the role of an instructional leader must be clearly outlined, and individuals who can best fill this role must be selected (Fullan, 2017). The key question addressed at this stage is: how can instructional leaders be encouraged to lead the change? The roles and responsibilities of PLC leaders must be clearly outlined. Rather than assigning responsibility to a select few, a whole-school approach must be utilized to benefit from the expertise of the team. Instructional leaders should engage in PD to ensure the effectiveness of their role. Empowering individuals also leads to ownership, which makes the innovations more successful (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

## Study the Impact

Although the impact of PLC is monitored after the application of the new learning intervention, a clear monitoring system must be in place right from the beginning. School leaders and PLC members must be aware of the system that will monitor the impact of PLC on student learning. The key question addressed at this stage is: what support must be provided to teachers if the PLC activities do not create the intended impact? Different strategies can be used for this phase, including regular meetings that assess available data and consulting all stakeholders for 360-degree feedback on the effectiveness of the PLC. Moreover, rather than evaluating the impact at the end, shorter inquiry cycles must be established to monitor efficacy and administer the timely intervention.

## Commemorate Success

To celebrate success, the PLC must first decide to open the success indicators in their context. The key question addressed at this stage is: how will success be documented? Through staff discussions, success indicators can be effectively outlined. Moreover, ideas can be generated regarding the means to celebrate success. Shorter cycles of inquiry are important here as they allow success to be frequently rewarded (Schaap and de Bruijn, 2018). Student data and feedback can be indicative of success and can also provide data for identifying additional opportunities for change.

## Barriers to Change and Strategies to Overcome These Barriers

Change in any form is always an uncomfortable process. The barriers that may arise while implementing this new initiative can be in the form of resistance from teachers who are set in their traditional ways and are fearful of innovation (Tariq et al., 2019). Additionally, time constraints and teacher workload may hinder the smooth implementation of this initiative. However, to overcome these barriers, the above-mentioned plan outlines various strategies. By engaging in reflective dialogue and communicating a shared vision, school administrators can take the first step towards building trust and encouraging teachers to collaborate. Additionally, the use of shared leadership would give value to teachers and create ownership. Retaining pre-existing structures, reviewing the current meeting schedules, revising timetables, and publishing an agreed-upon meeting schedule can bring some level of comfort to the staff members regarding workload and time constraints.

## Evaluating the Change

For the evaluation of outcomes at any stage of the cycle, there must be clear indicators that one intends to measure. With baseline data of what students know, the PLC can plan the next step of what

we want our students to learn. Here, the key indicator is student achievement data, which will be evaluated and studied to determine growth trends. Similarly, by establishing the expertise that teachers possess, one can plan for the development of skills that they may lack. For this purpose, self-evaluation checklists, staff appraisal data, and students' and parents' feedback forms can provide meaningful insight. To evaluate impact, short inquiry cycles would be planned rather than at the end. This would facilitate improvising strategies for planning interventions.

## Conclusion

The efficacy of PLCs in improving student outcomes is well-established through research. As a new initiative, however, schools must approach it through a well-outlined plan to maximize its benefits for the staff, students, and the school.

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