

# Review of: "Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for English Teachers as an Effective Alternative Framework for Professional Development"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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## Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for English Teachers as an Effective Alternative Framework for Professional Development

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### Abstract

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) has been adopted as an alternative model for professional development for English teachers in Israel since September 2016 and is supported by the English Inspectorate. This qualitative research, based on phenomenological methodology, evaluates how successful this model is for teachers in 2019/2020. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten lead teachers of PLCs and with six teacher participants, in addition to observations of both teacher PLCs and lead teacher sessions. The findings overwhelmingly support the PLC as an effective model of professional development for English teachers showing the need for and importance of a support system for teachers and a lead teacher from the field of English with specific qualities and ability to work with heterogeneous groups. Level of satisfaction was dependent on factors concerning the facilitating abilities of the lead teacher, the characteristics of the participants and their prior attitude to the PLC framework.

**Keywords:** PLC, Israel, teacher training, teacher support, teacher development.

### Introduction

Professional development (PD) can be defined as "teachers learning how to learn and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students' growth" (Avalos 2011, p10). Teachers are required to be learners themselves and go through a process of translating what they have learned into meaningful teaching practice in order to positively impact student learning. The question becomes: In what way can teachers develop effectively in order to benefit their students' learning?

Unfortunately, many traditional teacher PD programs offered today do not provide enough ongoing support for teachers who are endeavoring to implement new curricula or pedagogies. Owen claims that "traditional educational approaches... focused essentially on doing more of the same but better, are not actually working" (Owen 2015, p57). In addition, traditional PD programs not only disregard the existing knowledge of the teachers themselves, but the teachers are also not consulted as to what their own professional development should comprise (Butler & Schnellert 2012). As a result, teachers often become discouraged by the PD offered because it is ineffective and irrelevant. Teachers with their already overburdened schedules need valuable, ongoing programs that will be worth their investment of time and have a practical impact on their teaching and help them to establish new practices (Fisher 2011). This can be around a specific topic for example collective lesson planning instruction or have broader relevance on teaching Yang 2020). It has been shown that professional development which runs over an extended period of time can offer participant teachers a framework to learn and practice new ideas and approaches as well as the opportunity to implement newly learned practices in their classrooms and engage in self-evaluation (Dierking & Fox 2013).

Over the past thirty years there has been a paradigm shift regarding the professional development of teachers and this shift has gathered momentum. The impetus for this change is a growing need for students to develop twenty-first century skills including the ability to evaluate information, collaborate and be innovative. In order to achieve this goal, there has been a significant rethinking of how teachers teach, "Rather than being transmitters of information, teachers need to be facilitators of learning" (Owen 2012, p58). During the pandemic period this need for a PLC for EFL teachers was felt even more. Chi, (2016). This research will examine the PLC as an alternative for teacher in-service support.

### Literature review

#### *Professional learning communities (PLC)*

Teachers of EFL often feel isolated and in need of a community (Yeh 2005). Teacher study groups as a vehicle to strengthen EFL teachers' professional identity and voice. The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly, 7(4), 50-73. The model of professional learning communities was initiated in the 1990's in the United States. (DuFour 2004). A professional learning community (PLC) can be defined as "a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002 p4). Experienced teachers see themselves as "subject specialists" and are interested in discussing their ideas with their professional peers (Woolhouse & Cochrane 2009, p168).

Moreover, creating networks of different schools takes advantage of "a wider range of resources and expertise" and provides more opportunities to reflect collectively on practice (Prenger, Poortman & Handelzalts 2018, p2). One participant quoted in Prenger's study of learning communities said that "[The PLC] highly stimulates out of the box thinking about what I can do differently by means of others' knowledge" (Prenger 2018, p8).

The PLC encourages the participating teachers to evolve from the development of the individual teacher to a focus on cooperative progress in order to "promote a collaborative culture" (DuFour 2004, p8). "The focus of learning shifts from an individual mind to a process that unfolds within a participatory framework" (Buyse 2003, p266). Individual creativity is not seen as the pinnacle of professional development but rather "knowledge creation" takes place in a "social dynamic" that is seen as part of "21<sup>st</sup> century capabilities" (Sawyer, 2007 in Zhang 2009, p8). No longer is the learner considered a "receptacle of taught knowledge", and learning as a "discrete cognitive process" (Fuller 2005, p50). The knowledge and experience that teachers have amassed over their years of teaching and their intuition and wisdom of the teaching process are transformed through the PLC into clear "shared knowledge" that can now be disseminated to the wider professional community (Frost 2012, p218). In Prenger's study, teachers reported passing on the information from the PLC meetings to the staff at their school (Prenger 2018, p8).

The goal of these learning communities is not only to access one another's materials but to create responsible "communities of experts" engaged in ongoing reflection and collaborating together to improve their own teaching practices (Dierking & Fox 2013, p141). This aspect of collaborative reflection is considered essential to the PLC model as "knowledge is situated in experience and experience is understood through critical reflection with others who share this experience" (Buyse 2003, p267). Teachers were reported as valuing CPD that involves current collaborative inquiry-based activities including experimenting with classroom practices, working together and adapting practice due to peer feedback and self-evaluation (Pedder 2008 in Frost 2012).

The PLC has been found to have a positive effect on the motivation of the participating teachers to bring about effective teaching practice in the classroom. In Prenger's study, teachers experienced collaborative learning as "stimulating" and were described as "enthusiastic" and "engaged" in their professional development (Prenger 2018, p2 & 7). When teachers are involved cognitively and emotionally, they can effectively evaluate, develop and strengthen their pedagogical abilities in the classroom and thereby facilitate student growth. (Avalos 2011). Part of the creation of a community is that the participants need to be able to share both successes and failures and be able to acknowledge the problems they experience in the classroom without feeling that they are "committing professional suicide" (Carver 2004, p59). The atmosphere needs to be safe in order to discuss issues and concerns openly and honestly (idem.).

Traditional top-down professional development can be described as "linear relationships through which information is handed down from those who discover the professional knowledge to those who provide and receive educational services" (Buyse 2003, p265). In contrast, the PLC is led by a lead teacher as opposed to a lecturer. This reflects a bottom-up approach, where the teachers take an active role in their own professional development. In this way, this new model of learning communities allows for intimate and individually-tailored learning. The inquiry revolves around issues that emerge from "authentic teaching settings" as opposed to formal coursework that is "content-based" (Buyse 2003, p267). Teachers are engaged in reframing existing challenges, applying research and evidence to generate solutions, experimenting with new approaches, evaluating them and then revising methods to achieve more desired outcomes (Butler & Schneller 2012).

The PLC model is not only a vehicle for the sharing of best practices but also a venue for the co-constructing of knowledge through an active and collaborative process of discussion and sharing of ideas (Frost 2012, p219). This process empowers the teachers and causes them to "experience deep learning about their practice" and as a result they contribute to their school environment in a stronger "social and intellectual capacity" (idem.). The elements of exchanging ideas, listening to each other with respect and supporting one another build self esteem and encourage confidence in the participating teachers (Cordingley 2005). This leads to teachers feeling encouraged and "inspired" to initiate change in the classroom (Frost 2012, p220). In Owen's research, he reports on "wow" moments experienced by teachers in a PLC related to co-planning, co-teaching/observing, co-assessment and co-reflection" (Owen 2015, p62).

The social dynamic of the PLC encourages teachers to explore new practices and apply them in the classroom. Cochran-Smith and Lytle claim that the social structure of a group adopting an inquiry stance helps teachers persevere in the exploration and application of new ideas (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999). Van Horn suggests that when teachers have opportunities to solve problems collaboratively and have access to useful resources, they are more likely to take risks, persist in attempts to make change, and develop, adapt and/or apply approaches designed to support students in their classrooms (Van Horn 2006).

In summary, PLC members go through a process in which they take responsibility for sustained, collaborative knowledge advancement as well as personal growth. They connect their own interests and proficiency with those of the community to achieve their individual and collective goals of improving their teaching (Amar 2002 in Zhang 2009, p9). The members build on one another's strengths and improve suggested ideas and designs, contributing relevant and significant information that can advance the discussion. In other words, the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts: the strength of the PLC is not the sum total of each teacher member's contributions, rather collective knowledge building occurs by committed teacher participants dedicated to the goal of benefiting their students.

#### **The development of PLCs in Israel**

The PLCs that were initiated in America in the 1990s were based on improving student outcomes in the same school across disciplines. These communities engaged in "professional dialogue" and were not run as regular staff meetings and thereby transformed the whole school into a "professional learning community" (DuFour, 2004, p8). It was believed by educators at the time that professional development should be strictly site-based and should build on the combined expertise of in-house staff members working to find solutions for the unique challenges of that one school (Guskey et al. 2009, p496). This PLC model aimed to have a direct impact on teacher practice and student performance in that particular school across disciplines.

#### **Two models of PLCs in Israel**

Israel adopted two models of PLC's in 2016 and developed two alternative professional development programs for teachers. One program aims to develop a new professional culture in schools through teacher learning communities led by lead teachers in the schools themselves. This professional development is not connected to a particular subject taught, rather it is inquiry based and the teachers collaborate in a reflective, analytical process in which they examine their own teaching experiences and prior knowledge.

The second model of PLCs is not site based, but rather discipline based, where teachers from different schools in the same area meet to exchange ideas for professional growth and are led by a lead teacher. These sessions are part of the required 30 hours of in-service training a year set by the Ministry of Education for teachers, throughout the country. In addition to this mandatory in-service training, both PLC models are offered as an alternative to a voluntary face-to-face or online in-service training course.

#### **PLCs for English teachers**

In September 2016, the Ministry of Education in Israel launched the National Program for the Advancement of the Teaching of English, As part of this program, professional learning communities (PLC) for English teachers were established, "support groups...to make implementation appealing and applicable" (English Inspectorate Bulletin, September 2016). These learning communities

would "include peer observations, reflection on action, analysis of case studies and simulations" (idem.).

The Bulletin of July 2019 informed that over sixty PLCs for English teachers existed and promoted PLCs by stating that "the PLCs provide a safe and vibrant atmosphere where matters of pedagogy, classroom management and issues related to the English instruction are discussed while placing an emphasis on teaching oral proficiency skills and the integration of vocabulary targets within the framework of the Aligned Curriculum" (The English Inspectorate Bulletin, July 2019). As can be seen above, the Ministry set the agenda for the PLC's while at the same time allowing flexibility to deal with other topics of interest of the teacher participants. Each PLC is run by an English teacher, mostly English coordinators or pedagogical counselors. These lead teachers were trained throughout the year culminating in a two-day summer seminar. In 2020 the in-service training for PLC leaders in the form of their own PLC is 30 hours.

#### **A study on English PLCs by Ramah, Israel Ministry of Education in 2017**

A previous study on the state of the English PLCs in Israel was conducted in October 2017, a few months after the first PLC in English began. In order to aid the promoters of the PLC program to implement it successfully and to identify the factors that would aid or block its success (Ramah 2017, p4). The data included 45 interviews with teachers from 32 different PLCs and seventeen interviews were conducted with lead teachers. The conclusions of the survey, were generally positive. The majority of teachers interviewed were satisfied with the program (ibid, p6). The sessions were viewed as "relevant and practical" and "the framework encourages active learning and mutual sharing as opposed to regular in-service training" (ibid p7). The participants felt that they had received tools for teaching of speaking in the classroom that could immediately be implemented (idem.). Some teachers spoke about the benefit of "being able to release stress" and talk about various challenges at school (ibid, p8).

In most PLCs a positive atmosphere and pleasant social interaction during the sessions was reported however, professional and social ties over time and between meetings was not always maintained (idem.). Over 90% of participants expressed satisfaction with the PLC and were interested in taking part again in a PLC in one form or another. Some lead teachers mentioned that there were participants who lacked motivation and weren't interested in taking an active role in the PLC. Teachers suggested even more focus on spoken language, and to make sure that only English is spoken in the PLC. They requested even more simulations and observations and more tools for dealing with students with difficulties in the classroom. They recommended separating between high school and elementary school teachers (ibid. 12).

The PLC model for English teachers is in its fourth year of operation. There is justification for assessing how effective this alternative professional development model is for teachers in 2020 and assessing the progress of the PLC framework in meeting the needs of teachers engaged in professional development.

#### **Materials and Methods[RB1]**

This research is qualitative, involving observation, in-depth interviews and analysis. (Coenders 2010 in Prenger 2018,). Interviews and observation of PLCs served as the initial foundation for data interpretation. The interpretive process could be described as inductive, looking at what teachers were saying from an open inductive stance. [RB2] The process began by grouping ideas that came out of interviews with teachers into broad thematic groupings informed by the research questions and trying to discern patterns. The initial codes were re-examined against the data and refined through discussion. This included deriving relationships within and between codes and posing questions related to data and previous theoretical models.

The phenomenological methodology was used, and this researcher tried to enter into the PLC leaders' and participants' perspective and experience, while analyzing the researcher's personal experience of the research process itself. Transcripts were coded in detail and the focus shifted back and forth from the perspectives of the participants to the researcher's interpretation of their meaning. The analysis was not guided by a previously formulated hypothesis. This researcher attempted to develop an accurate and articulate description and understanding of the human experience of the participant in the PLC. Emphasis was placed in the observation on the level of involvement of the participants in discussion and group activities, their reactions in the PLC to the material presented, and the teachers' collaboration in the meetings. Two PLCs were observed twice each and another two PLCs were each observed once. The PLC for PLC leaders in-service training sessions were observed five times.

Semi-structured interviews of about twenty minutes on average with orienting open-ended questions were conducted. Ten lead teachers of PLCs were interviewed and six teacher participants were interviewed. All quotes of each teacher interviewed were verified with those teachers for accuracy. The effectiveness of the PLC was evaluated by asking the following main questions: What was the value for the English teachers of participating in a PLC as opposed to regular in-service professional development? Do English teachers actually implement new strategies and practices they learned in the PLCs? Do English teachers feel that their professional self has developed and strengthened as a result of their participation? Was the PLC an appropriate forum for deep reflection of teaching practices? Were the teachers actively involved in the sessions and did they share responsibility for the content of the PLC? Did meaningful collaboration take place? list of the questions asked is included in the appendix.

In this research, lead teacher will be referred to as (LT) and participants as (P). Participants and lead teachers will be referred to in the feminine form. Permission was obtained by the PLC leaders and participants before observing the PLC session and before joining WhatsApp groups. It was made clear to the people interviewed that they would be anonymously quoted in the research.

#### **Discussion[RB3]**

After going through the coding of the interviews and observations, five themes with their sub themes common to PLCs emerged.

1. A sense of community (support group, a safe environment).
  2. The role of the lead teacher (managing the atmosphere, dealing with the challenge of the problematic participant, being attentive to the needs of the participants and being a facilitator and not an instructor);
  3. Learning environment (sharing resources and good practices, active learning and experimentation, application of new practices in the classroom and reflective nature of the PLC);
  4. Group work and collaboration.
  5. Heterogeneous nature of the PLC (experienced and novice teachers, mixed high school and elementary school PLCs, native English speaking participants and non-native English speakers).
- Each theme will be discussed and elaborated on below.

Some of the above themes were already identified by the Rama report (2017) particularly the learning environment and collaboration. The researchers believe that because PLCs have been in operation for four years, it is now possible to try to accurately and deeply analyze the codes and make valid conclusions about them. In addition, new codes were identified, for example the creation of a support group, the importance of the lead teacher, dealing with problematic members of the PLC and the heterogeneous nature of the PLC.

#### **A sense of community**

### ***A support group***

Most of the teachers interviewed identified a supportive environment as the most significant aspect of the PLC because it provides validation for the participants. Tamar (LT) brought a quote from one of her participants, "The PLC was the ultimate teacher support group! I was not alone in my struggles as an English teacher...It was the perfect forum for me to feel safe in a non judgmental environment." (Lisa from Tamar's PLC). The value of the PLC as a support group has not been adequately discussed in the literature, yet the element of support was the first benefit of PLC's that was mentioned by the participants who were interviewed in this research.

The participants interviewed admitted that the relationships between the participants didn't develop into a personal connection between PLC sessions but there was a camaraderie and cooperation evidenced in the WhatsApp groups that were set up for collaborating between sessions. Unlike the findings of the Ramah survey (2017) h, the participants didn't express a need for more contact than the sessions and WhatsApp groups provided. The WhatsApp group was sufficient for continued sharing and basic contact. Aliza said:

I'm still in the WhatsApp. I didn't leave [even though I left the PLC at the end of the year]. It's nice to keep people's ideas. They post what they've done and it's useful to me. I can incorporate ideas in my teaching.

This researcher joined Elana's WhatsApp group and witnessed examples of help and collaboration.

### ***A safe environment***

One of the most important aspects of the creation of the PLC as a support group and mentioned by the participants interviewed, was the creation of a safe space where the participants felt comfortable sharing their failures and disappointments and expressing their need for help and advice. This finding concurs with Carver who claimed that the PLC needs to be a safe environment to air problems in the classroom in an honest way. She explains that when teachers collaborate to solve problems, they are more likely to take risks and share their successes and failures without feeling vulnerable and compromised (Carver 2004). As Rotem says,

The PLC is a safe environment to air garbage that needs to come out. If you are having a challenge in the classroom and you don't want to tell other teachers at school or the principal, you can bring it up in the PLC, an accepting environment. Here it is not threatening or judgmental; rather you can be vulnerable because the teachers there understand because they are also English teachers. [RB4]

Atara (P) shared that after a year of teaching a particularly challenging class she left teaching for three years

I didn't get enough guidance... If I had been in a safe environment where I had gotten the tools I had needed, maybe I wouldn't have had to stop teaching at that point.

This brings out the importance of providing a safe environment especially for novice teachers where they can learn tools and ideas. Atara explained that because many new teachers leave the field after the first few years of teaching, the PLC serves as an essential framework particularly for these teachers.

### ***Role of lead teacher***

#### ***Managing the atmosphere of the PLC***

The interviews and observations brought out the centrality of the lead teacher in the creation of a safe and supportive community. Some teachers interviewed believed that it was the responsibility of the lead teacher to create a balance between a safe environment in which teachers can share difficulties in order to find solutions together and to vent their frustrations. Rotem (P) emphasized that this balance depends on the effectiveness of the lead teacher.

Elana (LT) shares that there is a risk that when you put a group of teachers together, there can be a lot of "whining that can go on and on", "I need to let teachers share but at a certain point move the discussion to a different place." Elana mentioned that while validating the complaints of a particular participant is important, she needs to set boundaries as sensitively as possible. According to Linda, it is up to the lead teacher to regulate that English is spoken and that everyone is participating and not to let the English speakers, the experienced teachers or the more outgoing teachers "dominate". Linda added that some teachers are "less experienced and less involved." The lead teacher needs to "give space for each teacher to feel at ease.

#### ***Dealing with the challenge of the "problematic participant"***

While observing Elana's PLC and from the interviews conducted with participants of her PLC, it became clear that one particular member detracted from the warm atmosphere of the group. Atara (P) spoke of this participant's "negative energy". She "would get offended and Elana [lead teacher] would try to placate her...Some participants became impatient with her complaining and disrupting the atmosphere". Aliza (P) spoke about the waste of time caused by the complaining of certain teachers that led to "low morale" in the group, "We didn't get to discuss everything that Elana (LT) had planned because of these few teachers' whining and complaining."

Elana (LT) brought up the issue of this challenging participant in the PLC for PLC leaders session that this researcher observed: "She made other people in the group feel uncomfortable... She came late and left early and walked in and out a lot...She took away from the safe space. She is struggling with her teacher identity and low self-esteem." As a result of a long phone conversation with the participant, Elana (LT) reported that the participant "became more aware of the impact of her behavior on the group and became more sensitive." Elana (LT) summarizes this issue in an inspiring way:

Problematic members are a built-in challenge of the PLC. The PLC is a microcosm of life. There will always be people around us who will dominate in a negative way. We, as a community, need to learn from it and practice sensitivity and understanding. Most teachers have to deal with unpopular or resistant pupils in their class. According to Elana (LT), the presence of this member was "a learning experience" both for the lead teacher and for the participants as people and as teachers.

Another PLC leader, Kaila, explained that she "can't choose [her] PLC participants", just like a teacher can't choose her pupils for the most part. She felt that it wasn't her role as lead teacher to give answers to the group as to how to deal with the problematic member, rather "the group should deal with the challenge together." According to Aliza (P) the reason why these teachers weren't really suitable for the PLC was because "they didn't buy into the idea of a PLC...They weren't willing to hear advice from other teachers. Rotem (P) feels that it's important that potential PLC participants "know what to expect" from the PLC framework before they decide to join. One may conclude from Aliza and Rotem's comments that it is important to explain to potential participants the difference between a PLC and regular in-service professional development in order to filter out teachers that are not suitable for a PLC framework. In addition, it could be suggested that lead teachers meet participants before the PLC begins in order to check whether they are suitable for a PLC.

### ***Being attentive to the needs of the participants***

Consistent with the bottom-up approach of the PLC, the participants were invited to bring up topics that they wanted to deal with in the meetings in addition to the topic set by the Ministry about speaking in English. This aspect of bottom down was discussed by Buysse, who maintained that an essential element of the PLC was the teachers taking an active and responsible role in their own development and that the topics dealt with in the PLC would be relevant, meaningful and authentic to the participants (Buysse 2003, p267).

Mandy (LT) said that she always plans her sessions but is prepared to change what she has planned to suit the needs of her participants: "If a teacher brings up an issue, I'll change what I planned to do." Linda (LT) understood from her participants that they wanted something practical, tools that they could implement in their teaching, "not just a discussion." From the observation of the PLCs and interviews with PLC participants, the extent to which participants were engaged in the PLC was in most part due to the lead teacher.

### ***Being a facilitator and not an instructor***

Almost all the lead teachers interviewed or observed were English coordinators or pedagogical counselors and therefore they have a lot of knowledge and experience to share. According to the lead teachers interviewed, it was a challenge for these leaders to restrain themselves and not provide the knowledge in a top-down way. Elana herself mentioned that she had learned a lot about leadership through leading the PLC:

It's a big accomplishment to empower people and encourage people to give their own ideas, instead of me giving mine. In the beginning I felt in charge and then I learned to take a step back and let the participants be creative. I hold myself back

Mandy (LT) spoke about the expectations of the participants " It was a process to educate the participants that they don't need me to give them everything.

One may conclude that the role of the lead teacher is so essential to the success of the PLC that training for the PLC leaders needs to be ongoing and effective. PLC lead teacher training should continue to be run in a way that models the way PLCs should be facilitated. PLC lead teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their leadership styles and do peer observation of one another. The PLC for PLC leader sessions that this researcher observed were indeed run like a PLC with lead teachers bringing up case studies. The more teachers collaborate, find solutions together and build materials, the more confident and empowered they will feel (Frost 2012).

### **Learning environment**

#### ***Sharing resources and good practices***

Being in a supportive community allows the teachers to see themselves as a resource for one another, not just as emotional support. Elana believes that one of the reasons teachers come to her PLC is because of the "great atmosphere...People feel equal and that enables real sharing." This feeling of equality was mentioned by Frost who spoke about the teacher members of the PLC as "knowledge creators" and "knowledge users" in "an egalitarian framework" (Frost 2012, p218).

One participant, Aliza, shared that she finds regular in-service training "demeaning" at times as opposed to the PLC which is "empowering":

[Presenters of traditional in-service training] are not usually in the classroom environment and they are not connected to our reality. [The PLC recognizes that] we as teachers are a huge asset and resource and utilizes us. I finally get to hear what other teachers are experiencing. This gives me confidence and helps my teaching.

This idea is supported by the article by Frost in which he asserts that the cooperative elements of the PLC, namely giving support, listening with respect and exchanging ideas contribute towards a greater feeling of self-esteem in the participating teachers (Frost 2012, p219). On the other hand, this researcher observed a PLC of Dasi and Sarah that was only thirty hours with two different lead teachers leading at different times. This group was a lot less cohesive evidenced by the fact that there was less participation and some of the participants were on their phones while other members were sharing ideas. Mandy (LT) maintained that if you want to create a community you have to meet frequently

### ***Active learning and experimentation***

One of the benefits of the PLC according to the participants interviewed was the opportunity to experiment with and explore new ideas and creative technological tools. Nava (P) spoke about the excitement new teachers in the PLC experienced when discovering and experimenting with new technological tools that they could use in class, "the PLC gives [you] a chance to experiment." Aliza (P) added that working with the actual tools in the PLC "made us more confident."

Elana (LT) said that for the most part teachers wanted to be challenged but some teachers didn't want to be active and experiment, especially in the evening after a long working day. Elana (LT) comments that not every teacher comes to the PLC looking to be empowered and is willing to upgrade her teaching methods.

### ***Application of new practices in the classroom***

Some teachers in the PLC felt that part of their role was to go back to their English staff and share with them the tools and ideas they had received in the PLC. Aliza (P) said,

We're all representatives. We're supposed to go back to schools and share what we've learned. I go back to weekly staff meetings and share and teachers are open to my sharing.

This finding concurs with Frost who spoke about how participants were "encouraged and inspired" to initiate change in the classroom (Frost 2012, p220).

Atara (P) used ideas from the PLC in her class for non-readers, like the English café. She took the basic idea from the PLC and adapted it to her class. She made the pupils waiters and prepared tables with tablecloths and cookies and they practiced speaking, "They loved it. It was nice to do something creative." Atara (P) said ...If you're not learning you're not moving as a professional." Even if most of the teachers interviewed didn't feel that their teaching philosophy as such had changed, the PLC gave them more confidence in areas that needed strengthening.

### ***Reflective nature of the PLC***

Reflecting on teaching practices is one of the main components observed in the PLC sessions. I observed a reflective activity in Elana's PLC followed by a discussion. Elana then asked for feedback about the activity itself and how it could be used to promote speaking in the classroom. There was a double benefit to the activity: Firstly, the participants did self-reflection about teaching practice and then shared with the group as a whole. Secondly, by experienced the activity themselves they will be able to use it effectively in the classroom. This concurs with Pedder who found that teachers

were reported as valuing CPD that involves current collaborative inquiry-based activities including experimenting with classroom practices, working together and adapting practice due to peer feedback and self-evaluation (Pedder 2008 in Frost 2012).

### **Group work and collaboration**

The method of instruction in the PLC is mainly working in groups and collaborating. I observed such a collaboration with engaged participation who expressed curiosity and empathy, both in the group discussions and also when the groups were presenting. This observation is in line with the research of Zhang who talked about the members building one another's strengths and engaging in "collective knowledge building" (Zhang 9)

As suggested by teachers interviewed, the collaborative method of the PLC could be used by the participants as a model for how they as teachers should teach in the classroom. It was clear to this researcher while observing the PLCs that while sharing ideas and tips for teaching is one of the main benefits of the PLC, the overriding advantage is the collaboration – building something together as a group. These findings regarding collaboration concur with the finding of Dierking and Fox that the goal of these learning communities is not only to access one another's materials but to create responsible "communities of experts" engaged in ongoing reflection and collaborating together to improve their own teaching practices (Dierking & Fox 2013, p141).[RB5]

### **Heterogeneous nature of the PLC**

#### ***Experienced and novice teachers***

All participants and lead teachers interviewed agreed that the combination of experienced and less experienced teachers was an advantage of the PLC. Elana (LT) said that the young teacher gets a boost of confidence because "she feels that she has something to give." Even the experienced teachers felt that it was a beneficial thing that less experienced teachers were there. Atara (P) said that she learned from the "new ideas of the young teachers, especially the technological tools and the fresh perspective they brought." Aliza (P) said that the "big difference in seniority in Elana's PLC led to respect for one another. Elana (LT) feels that not only do the inexperienced teachers gain from listening to the experienced teachers, but they also have something to give and "this raises their self-esteem."

A question that could be explored is why not enough novice teachers are attending the PLCs and what can be done to attract them. Yakira (LT) noted that despite the supportive environment she tried to provide, "fewer novice teachers remained in the PLC for a second year. It was definitely easier for the experienced teachers to feel comfortable"

### **Mixed high school and elementary school PLCs**

The question of whether the PLC should be a mix of high school and elementary school teachers brought different reactions. Some teachers felt that a mix of teachers was an advantage. Aliza (P) felt that it was an advantage for high school teachers because they "are too focused on the final exam and the elementary school teachers can remind them of the creativity of teaching English." She also felt that even in high school you have pupils whose English is actually on the level of elementary and the teachers could learn teaching strategies from the elementary school teachers. Rotem, an elementary school teacher in mixed PLC, feels that a mixed PLC enables the participants to see the whole picture...You have to know what's happening in education on all levels.

On the other hand, Elana, (LT), feels that there is a big difference between high school and elementary school teachers in terms of the level of their spoken and written English. "You need higher level English skills to teach on a high school level and so it is problematic to have a mixed PLC." Mandy (LT) said that the English level of some elementary school teachers in her PLC was not on a high level. However, she feels that the mixed PLC is an advantage because it is important to create a sense of community across grade levels. At the PLC for PLC leaders conference, lead teachers had different opinions on this issue. Most admitted that elementary and high school teachers don't usually want to be in a PLC together.

In summary, the reactions to a mixed PLC were mixed as they were in the Rama survey (Ramah 2017, p17) but more participants particularly high school teachers preferred PLCs being separate for elementary and high school teachers. A future research could compare the reactions of high school and elementary school teachers on this issue.

### ***Native English speaking participants and non-Native English speakers***

In the Rama survey (2017) it was found that English speakers were critical of the low level of English of some of the non-native English speaking teachers. The Israeli teachers in turn were critical of the class management of the English speaking teachers. This researcher found that there was a majority of native English speakers in most of the PLCs surveyed. In Yakira's elementary PLC it was observed that the English speaking teachers dominated the discussion. Yakira (LT) said, "those who were concerned about making mistakes spoke less." When lead teachers were asked whether English speakers dominated in the PLCs most answered that they didn't see that. Elana said that "they were more reticent but they did participate when asked." Atara (P) said that "there was respect between colleagues, no judging." From the observation of this researcher of the different PLCs, it is clear to this researcher that more experienced native English speakers dominated the discussion. It is suggested to ask non-native English speakers what could enable them to be more actively involved in the PLC.

### **Conclusion**

The interviews with participants and lead teachers as well as the observations of the PLCs reflect that the PLC is a very positive and effective alternative model to a traditional top down in-service training. This research shows that the aspect of a supportive and safe community environment is a strong advantage of the PLC. Being able to share challenges in the classroom with teachers of the same discipline enabled the participants to feel validated and empowered. Being able to give input about what topics would be covered in the PLC, in line with the bottom-up approach, made the learning meaningful and relevant. Furthermore, the learning environment was perceived as beneficial, particularly the characteristic of sharing good practices, both by experienced and novice teachers. Some teachers even served as brokers of the new information to their school. The opportunity to reflect on teaching methods was a feature of the PLC that enabled its members to evaluate and improve as teachers. The hands on experimentation of new tools and ideas, enabled the teachers to feel like they could successfully implement these good practices in the classroom. Collaborating on ideas by working together in groups was a significant aspect of the PLC because it cemented the group together as a community and allowed them to create new materials together that could be used in the classroom. In actual fact, the PLC provides a microcosm for teachers to experiment with the 2020 classroom model by learning new technological tools and experimenting with collaboration and group work, thus experiencing active learning.

The interviews and observations brought out various challenges of the PLC for the lead teacher, for example how to manage participants who behave inappropriately in the sessions. Another challenge is how to involve all members, those whose spoken English is less developed, less experienced participants, shy members that find it difficult to participate or members that are in the PLC for the hours but are not interested in taking an active role. The lead teacher was seen as essential to the success of the PLC in how she created and sustained an encouraging and positive learning environment.



In evaluating the effectiveness of the PLC framework, factors like the facilitating abilities of the lead teacher, the characteristics of the participants and their prior attitude to the PLC framework all influence the levels of satisfaction of its participants and the success of the community and learning process. In the three years since the Ramah study was conducted, one can see that there has been an increase in the popularity of the PLC and its recognition by teachers as a valid and even preferable alternative to regular in-service training, evidenced by the rise in the number of PLCs. The observations of PLCs in this research showed high levels of participation and engagement while the participants interviewed, both lead teachers and participants, expressed excitement and positivity about the PLC as an alternative model of professional development.

From this researcher's observation of the PLC for PLC leaders session at the beginning of the school year 2019/2020, it was clear that there was a strong marketing effort by the lead teachers and the Inspectorate to attract teachers to join a PLC. These efforts should be accompanied by clear explanations as to what the elements of the PLC are and what is expected of the participants in order to prevent non-cooperative teachers from being part of these communities. In addition, as evidenced by the challenge of "problematic participants", it is important for PLC leaders to receive guidance and support in the form of their own PLC. This is important also in order to enable the PLC lead teacher to experience herself the advantages of a collaborative, reflective framework.. At the same time dealing with less desirable members of a community is part of the learning process of communities in general.

### Limitations and Recommendations

It would have been preferable to have interviewed lead teachers and participants from the same PLC's and observed those same PLCs in order to check impressions of lead teachers and their participants and their validity. This research is heavily weighted on the PLC of Elana, who was observed twice, interviewed twice and two of her participants were interviewed, which effectively makes this research a kind of case study. Secondly, in order to effectively examine the influence of factors like teacher experience and language of the participant on the effectiveness of the PLC, one would have to do a quantitative survey of a large number of PLCs. One could thereby evaluate why fewer novice teachers are signing up and staying in PLCs. Furthermore, one could interview non-native English participants of PLCs and determine how to increase the comfort level of these non-native English speakers in the PLC as well as improving their level of English.

In future research it is important to examine student outcomes and experience of their teachers who are attending PLCs, whether their teacher's participation in the PLCs has affected her teaching style in a significant way, resulting in more collaborative, active style learning.

From the in-depth interviews conducted with PLC participants, it is clear that the main motivation for attending the PLCs was because the hours of in-service training were needed to supplement salary and the PLC provides the required number of hours. The proximity of the PLC, being in the professional teacher training center, in some cases, the PLC wasn't chosen for professional training because of its unique elements rather because that was the in-service training offered that was closest. One of the difficulties that came out of the interviews was the overwhelming workload of the teachers and the lack of desire to take another in-service training in addition to the compulsory school in-service training of 30 hours that teachers are required to take. It is this researcher's suggestion to find a way to combine the compulsory school in-service training with a PLC in order that more teachers will be motivated to join a PLC.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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[RB1] This section would benefit from a clearer theoretical grounding in terms of research design (suggest grounded theory?), and research questions based on a theoretical framework for teacher learning (see Korthagen, 2010 for example). Without RQs, the findings seem somewhat unfocused

[RB2] Strengthen this statement – what IS it? Suggest grounded theory?

[RB3] You should present findings separately from discussion

[RB4] Indent quotes, and/or use quotation marks

[RB5] Connection to other research in discussion section **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for English Teachers as an Effective Alternative Framework for Professional Development**

Liora Silberstein, Elaine Hoter<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) has been adopted as an alternative model for professional development for English teachers in Israel since September 2016 and is supported by the English Inspectorate. This qualitative research, based on phenomenological methodology, evaluates how successful this model is for teachers in 2019/2020. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten lead teachers of PLCs and with six teacher participants, in addition to observations of both teacher PLCs and lead teacher sessions. The findings overwhelmingly support the PLC as an effective model of professional development for English teachers showing the need for and importance of a support system for teachers and a lead teacher from the field of English with specific qualities and ability to work with heterogeneous groups. Level of satisfaction was dependent on factors concerning the facilitating abilities of the lead teacher, the characteristics of the participants and their prior attitude to the PLC framework.

**Keywords:** PLC, Israel, teacher training, teacher support, teacher development.

## Introduction

Professional development (PD) can be defined as "teachers learning how to learn and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students' growth" (Avalos 2011, p10). Teachers are required to be learners themselves and go through a process of translating what they have learned into meaningful teaching practice in order to positively impact student learning. The question becomes: In what way can teachers develop effectively in order to benefit their students' learning?

Unfortunately, many traditional teacher PD programs offered today do not provide enough ongoing support for teachers who are endeavoring to implement new curricula or pedagogies. Owen claims that "traditional educational approaches... focused essentially on doing more of the same but better, are not actually working" (Owen 2015, p57). In addition, traditional PD programs not only disregard the existing knowledge of the teachers themselves, but the teachers are also not consulted as to what their own professional development should comprise (Butler & Schnellert 2012). As a result, teachers often become discouraged by the PD offered because it is ineffective and irrelevant. Teachers with their already overburdened schedules need valuable, ongoing programs that will



be worth their investment of time and have a practical impact on their teaching and help them to establish new practices (Fisher 2011). This can be around a specific topic for example collective lesson planning instruction or have broader relevance on teaching Yang 2020). It has been shown that professional development which runs over an extended period of time can offer participant teachers a framework to learn and practice new ideas and approaches as well as the opportunity to implement newly learned practices in their classrooms and engage in self-evaluation (Dierking & Fox 2013).

Over the past thirty years there has been a paradigm shift regarding the professional development of teachers and this shift has gathered momentum. The impetus for this change is a growing need for students to develop twenty-first century skills including the ability to evaluate information, collaborate and be innovative. In order to achieve this goal, there has been a significant rethinking of how teachers teach, "Rather than being transmitters of information, teachers need to be facilitators of learning" (Owen 2012, p58). During the pandemic period this need for a PLC for EFL teachers was felt even more. Chi, 2016). This research will examine the PLC as an alternative for teacher in-service support.

## Literature review

### *Professional learning communities (PLC)*

Teachers of EFL often feel isolated and in need of a community (Yeh 2005). Teacher study groups as a vehicle to strengthen EFL teachers' professional identity and voice. The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly, 7(4), 50-73. The model of professional learning communities was initiated in the 1990's in the United States. (DuFour 2004). A professional learning community (PLC) can be defined as "a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002 p4). Experienced teachers see themselves as "subject specialists" and are interested in discussing their ideas with their professional peers (Woolhouse & Cochrane 2009, p168). Moreover, creating networks of different schools takes advantage of "a wider range of resources and expertise" and provides more opportunities to reflect collectively on practice (Prenger, Poortman & Handelzalts 2018, p2). One participant quoted in Prenger's study of learning communities said that "[The PLC] highly stimulates out of the box thinking about what I can do differently by means of others' knowledge" (Prenger 2018, p8).

The PLC encourages the participating teachers to evolve from the development of the individual teacher to a focus on cooperative progress in order to "promote a collaborative culture" (DuFour 2004, p8). "The focus of learning shifts from an individual mind to a process that unfolds within a participatory framework" (Buyse 2003, p266). Individual creativity is not seen as the pinnacle of professional development but rather "knowledge creation" takes place in a "social dynamic" that is seen as part of "21<sup>st</sup> century capabilities" (Sawyer, 2007 in Zhang 2009, p8). No longer is the learner considered a "receptacle of taught knowledge", and learning as a "discrete cognitive process" (Fuller 2005, p50). The knowledge and experience that teachers have amassed over their years of teaching and their intuition and wisdom of the teaching process are transformed through the PLC into clear "shared knowledge" that can now be disseminated to the wider professional community (Frost 2012, p218). In Prenger's study, teachers reported passing on the information from the PLC meetings to the staff at their school (Prenger 2018, p8).

The goal of these learning communities is not only to access one another's materials but to create responsible "communities of experts" engaged in ongoing reflection and collaborating together to improve their own teaching practices (Dierking & Fox 2013, p141). This aspect of collaborative reflection is considered essential to the PLC model as "knowledge is situated in experience and experience is understood through critical reflection with others who share this experience" (Buyse 2003, p267). Teachers were reported as valuing CPD that involves current collaborative inquiry-based activities including experimenting with classroom practices, working together and adapting practice due to peer feedback and self-evaluation (Pedder 2008 in Frost 2012).

The PLC has been found to have a positive effect on the motivation of the participating teachers to bring about effective teaching practice in the classroom. In Prenger's study, teachers experienced collaborative learning as "stimulating" and were described as "enthusiastic" and "engaged" in their professional development (Prenger 2018, p2 & 7). When teachers are involved cognitively and emotionally, they can effectively evaluate, develop and strengthen their pedagogical abilities in the classroom and thereby facilitate student growth. (Avalos 2011). Part of the creation of a community is that the participants need to be able to share both successes and failures and be able to acknowledge the problems they experience in the classroom without feeling that they are "committing professional suicide" (Carver 2004, p59). The atmosphere needs to be safe in order to discuss issues and concerns openly and honestly (idem.).

Traditional top-down professional development can be described as "linear relationships through which information is handed down from those who discover the professional knowledge to those who provide and receive educational services" (Buyse 2003, p265). In contrast, the PLC is led by a lead teacher as opposed to a lecturer. This reflects a bottom-up approach, where the teachers take an active role in their own professional development. In this way, this new model of learning communities allows for intimate and individually-tailored learning. The inquiry revolves around issues that emerge from "authentic teaching settings" as opposed to formal coursework that is "content-based" (Buyse 2003, p267). Teachers are engaged in reframing existing challenges, applying research and evidence to generate solutions, experimenting with new approaches, evaluating them and then revising methods to achieve more desired outcomes (Butler & Schneller 2012).

The PLC model is not only a vehicle for the sharing of best practices but also a venue for the co-constructing of knowledge through an active and collaborative process of discussion and sharing of ideas (Frost 2012, p219). This process empowers the teachers and causes them to "experience deep learning about their practice" and as a result they contribute to their school environment in a stronger "social and intellectual capacity" (idem.). The elements of exchanging ideas, listening to each other with respect and supporting one another build self esteem and encourage confidence in the participating teachers (Cordingley 2005). This leads to teachers feeling encouraged and "inspired" to initiate change in the classroom (Frost 2012, p220). In Owen's research, he reports on "wow" moments experienced by teachers in a PLC related to co-planning, co-teaching/observing, co-assessment and co-reflection" (Owen 2015, p62).

The social dynamic of the PLC encourages teachers to explore new practices and apply them in the classroom. Cochran-Smith and Lytle claim that the social structure of a group adopting an inquiry stance helps teachers persevere in the exploration and application of new ideas (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999). Van Horn suggests that when teachers have opportunities to solve problems collaboratively and have access to useful resources, they are more likely to take risks, persist in attempts to make change, and develop, adapt and/or apply approaches designed to support students in their classrooms (Van Horn 2006).

In summary, PLC members go through a process in which they take responsibility for sustained, collaborative knowledge advancement as well as personal growth. They connect their own interests and proficiency with those of the community to achieve their individual and collective goals of improving their teaching (Amar 2002 in Zhang 2009, p9). The members build on one another's strengths and improve suggested ideas and designs, contributing relevant and significant information that can advance the discussion. In other words, the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts: the strength of the PLC is not the sum total of each teacher member's contributions, rather collective knowledge building occurs by committed teacher participants dedicated to the goal of benefiting their students.

### **The development of PLCs in Israel**

The PLCs that were initiated in America in the 1990s were based on improving student outcomes in the same school across disciplines. These communities engaged in "professional dialogue" and

were not run as regular staff meetings and thereby transformed the whole school into a "professional learning community" (DuFour, 2004, p8). It was believed by educators at the time that professional development should be strictly site-based and should build on the combined expertise of in-house staff members working to find solutions for the unique challenges of that one school (Guskey et al. 2009, p496). This PLC model aimed to have a direct impact on teacher practice and student performance in that particular school across disciplines.

## Two models of PLCs in Israel

Israel adopted two models of PLC's in 2016 and developed two alternative professional development programs for teachers. One program aims to develop a new professional culture in schools through teacher learning communities led by lead teachers in the schools themselves. This professional development is not connected to a particular subject taught, rather it is inquiry based and the teachers collaborate in a reflective, analytical process in which they examine their own teaching experiences and prior knowledge.

The second model of PLCs is not site based, but rather discipline based, where teachers from different schools in the same area meet to exchange ideas for professional growth and are led by a lead teacher. These sessions are part of the required 30 hours of in-service training a year set by the Ministry of Education for teachers, throughout the country. In addition to this mandatory in-service training, both PLC models are offered as an alternative to a voluntary face-to-face or online in-service training course.

## PLCs for English teachers

In September 2016, the Ministry of Education in Israel launched the National Program for the Advancement of the Teaching of English, As part of this program, professional learning communities (PLC) for English teachers were established, "support groups...to make implementation appealing and applicable" (English Inspectorate Bulletin, September 2016). These learning communities would "include peer observations, reflection on action, analysis of case studies and simulations" (idem.).

The Bulletin of July 2019 informed that over sixty PLCs for English teachers existed and promoted PLCs by stating that "the PLCs provide a safe and vibrant atmosphere where matters of pedagogy, classroom management and issues related to the English instruction are discussed while placing an emphasis on teaching oral proficiency skills and the integration of vocabulary targets within the framework of the Aligned Curriculum" (The English Inspectorate Bulletin, July 2019). As can be seen above, the Ministry set the agenda for the PLC's while at the same time allowing flexibility to deal with other topics of interest of the teacher participants. Each PLC is run by an English teacher, mostly English coordinators or pedagogical counselors. These lead teachers were trained throughout the year culminating in a two-day summer seminar In 2020 the in-service training for PLC leaders in the form of their own PLC is 30 hours.

## A study on English PLCs by Ramah, Israel Ministry of Education in 2017

A previous study on the state of the English PLCs in Israel was conducted in October 2017, a few months after the first PLC is English began. in order to aid the promoters of the PLC program to implement it successfully and to identify the factors that would aid or block its success (Ramah 2017, p4). The data included 45 interviews with teachers from 32 different PLCs and seventeen interviews were conducted with lead teachers. The conclusions of the survey, were generally positive. The majority of teachers interviewed were satisfied with the program (ibid, p6). The sessions were viewed as "relevant and practical" and "the framework encourages active learning and mutual sharing as opposed to regular in-service training" (ibid p7). The participants felt that they had received tools for teaching of speaking in the classroom that could immediately be implemented (idem.). Some teachers spoke about the benefit of "being able to release stress" and talk about various challenges at school (ibid, p8).

In most PLCs a positive atmosphere and pleasant social interaction during the sessions was reported however, professional and social ties over time and between meetings was not always maintained (idem.). Over 90% of participants expressed satisfaction with the PLC and were interested in taking part again in a PLC in one form or another. Some lead teachers mentioned that there were participants who lacked motivation and weren't interested in taking an active role in the PLC. Teachers suggested even more focus on spoken language, and to make sure that only English is spoken in the PLC. They requested even more simulations and observations and more tools for dealing with students with difficulties in the classroom. They recommended separating between high school and elementary school teachers (ibid. 12).

The PLC model for English teachers is in its fourth year of operation. There is justification for assessing how effective this alternative professional development model is for teachers in 2020 and assessing the progress of the PLC framework in meeting the needs of teachers engaged in professional development.

## Materials and Methods[RB1]

This research is qualitative, involving observation, in-depth interviews and analysis. (Coenders 2010 in Prenger 2018.). Interviews and observation of PLCs served as the initial foundation for data interpretation. The interpretive process could be described as inductive, looking at what teachers were saying from an open inductive stance. [RB2] The process began by grouping ideas that came out of interviews with teachers into broad thematic groupings informed by the research questions and trying to discern patterns. The initial codes were re-examined against the data and refined through discussion. This included deriving relationships within and between codes and posing questions related to data and previous theoretical models.

The phenomenological methodology was used, and this researcher tried to enter into the PLC leaders' and participants' perspective and experience, while analyzing the researcher's personal experience of the research process itself. Transcripts were coded in detail and the focus shifted back and forth from the perspectives of the participants to the researcher's interpretation of their meaning. The analysis was not guided by a previously formulated hypothesis. This researcher attempted to develop an accurate and articulate description and understanding of the human experience of the participant in the PLC. Emphasis was placed in the observation on the level of involvement of the participants in discussion and group activities, their reactions in the PLC to the material presented, and the teachers' collaboration in the meetings. Two PLCs were observed twice each and another two PLCs were each observed once. The PLC for PLC leaders in-service training sessions were observed five times.

Semi-structured interviews of about twenty minutes on average with orienting open-ended questions were conducted. Ten lead teachers of PLCs were interviewed and six teacher participants were interviewed. All quotes of each teacher interviewed were verified with those teachers for accuracy. The effectiveness of the PLC was evaluated by asking the following main questions: What was the value for the English teachers of participating in a PLC as opposed to regular in-service professional development? Do English teachers actually implement new strategies and practices they learned in the PLCs?. Do English teachers feel that their professional self has developed and strengthened as a result of their participation? Was the PLC an appropriate forum for deep reflection of teaching practices? Were the teachers actively involved in the sessions and did they share responsibility for the content of the PLC? Did meaningful collaboration take place? list of the questions asked is included in the appendix.

In this research, lead teacher will be referred to as (LT) and participants as (P). Participants and lead teachers will be referred to in the feminine form. Permission was obtained by the PLC leaders and participants before observing the PLC session and before joining WhatsApp groups. It was made clear to the people interviewed that they would be anonymously quoted in the research.

**Discussion**[RB3]

After going through the coding of the interviews and observations, five themes with their sub themes common to PLCs emerged.

1. A sense of community (support group, a safe environment).
  2. The role of the lead teacher (managing the atmosphere, dealing with the challenge of the problematic participant, being attentive to the needs of the participants and being a facilitator and not an instructor);
  3. Learning environment (sharing resources and good practices, active learning and experimentation, application of new practices in the classroom and reflective nature of the PLC);
  4. Group work and collaboration.
  5. Heterogeneous nature of the PLC (experienced and novice teachers, mixed high school and elementary school PLCs, native English speaking participants and non-native English speakers).
- Each theme will be discussed and elaborated on below.

Some of the above themes were already identified by the Rama report (2017) particularly the learning environment and collaboration. The researchers believe that because PLCs have been in operation for four years, it is now possible to try to accurately and deeply analyze the codes and make valid conclusions about them. In addition, new codes were identified, for example the creation of a support group, the importance of the lead teacher, dealing with problematic members of the PLC and the heterogenous nature of the PLC.

**A sense of community*****A support group***

Most of the teachers interviewed identified a supportive environment as the most significant aspect of the PLC because it provides validation for the participants. Tamar (LT) brought a quote from one of her participants, "The PLC was the ultimate teacher support group! I was not alone in my struggles as an English teacher...It was the perfect forum for me to feel safe in a non judgmental environment." (Lisa from Tamar's PLC). The value of the PLC as a support group has not been adequately discussed in the literature, yet the element of support was the first benefit of PLC's that was mentioned by the participants who were interviewed in this research.

The participants interviewed admitted that the relationships between the participants didn't develop into a personal connection between PLC sessions but there was a camaraderie and cooperation evidenced in the WhatsApp groups that were set up for collaborating between sessions. Unlike the findings of the Ramah survey (2017) h, the participants didn't express a need for more contact than the sessions and WhatsApp groups provided. The WhatsApp group was sufficient for continued sharing and basic contact. Aliza said:

I'm still in the WhatsApp. I didn't leave [even though I left the PLC at the end of the year]. It's nice to keep people's ideas. They post what they've done and it's useful to me. I can incorporate ideas in my teaching.

This researcher joined Elana's WhatsApp group and witnessed examples of help and collaboration.

***A safe environment***

One of the most important aspects of the creation of the PLC as a support group and mentioned by the participants interviewed, was the creation of a safe space where the participants felt comfortable sharing their failures and disappointments and expressing their need for help and advice. This finding concurs with Carver who claimed that the PLC needs to be a safe environment to air problems in the classroom in an honest way. She explains that when teachers collaborate to solve problems, they are more likely to take risks and share their successes and failures without feeling vulnerable and compromised (Carver 2004). As Rotem says,

The PLC is a safe environment to air garbage that needs to come out. If you are having a challenge in the classroom and you don't want to tell other teachers at school or the principal, you can bring it up in the PLC, an accepting environment. Here it is not threatening or judgmental; rather you can be vulnerable because the teachers there understand because they are also English teachers.

Atara (P) shared that after a year of teaching a particularly challenging class she left teaching for three years

I didn't get enough guidance... If I had been in a safe environment where I had gotten the tools I had needed, maybe I wouldn't have had to stop teaching at that point.

This brings out the importance of providing a safe environment especially for novice teachers where they can learn tools and ideas. Atara explained that because many new teachers leave the field after the first few years of teaching, the PLC serves as an essential framework particularly for these teachers.

**Role of lead teacher*****Managing the atmosphere of the PLC***

The interviews and observations brought out the centrality of the lead teacher in the creation of a safe and supportive community. Some teachers interviewed believed that it was the responsibility of the lead teacher to create a balance between a safe environment in which teachers can share difficulties in order to find solutions together and to vent their frustrations. Rotem (P) emphasized that this balance depends on the effectiveness of the lead teacher.

Elana (LT) shares that there is a risk that when you put a group of teachers together, there can be a lot of "whining that can go on and on", "I need to let teachers share but at a certain point move the discussion to a different place." Elana mentioned that while validating the complaints of a particular participant is important, she needs to set boundaries as sensitively as possible. According to Linda, it is up to the lead teacher to regulate that English is spoken and that everyone is participating and not to let the English speakers, the experienced teachers or the more outgoing teachers "dominate". Linda added that some teachers are "less experienced and less involved." The lead teacher needs to "give space for each teacher to feel at ease.

***Dealing with the challenge of the "problematic participant"***

While observing Elana's PLC and from the interviews conducted with participants of her PLC, it became clear that one particular member detracted from the warm atmosphere of the group. Atara (P) spoke of this participant's "negative energy". She "would get offended and Elana [lead teacher] would try to placate her...Some participants became impatient with her complaining and disrupting the atmosphere". Aliza (P) spoke about the waste of time caused by the complaining of certain teachers that led to "low morale" in the group, "We didn't get to discuss everything that Elana (LT) had

planned because of these few teachers' whining and complaining."

Elana (LT) brought up the issue of this challenging participant in the PLC for PLC leaders session that this researcher observed: "She made other people in the group feel uncomfortable... She came late and left early and walked in and out a lot...She took away from the safe space. She is struggling with her teacher identity and low self-esteem." As a result of a long phone conversation with the participant, Elana (LT) reported that the participant "became more aware of the impact of her behavior on the group and became more sensitive." Elana (LT) summarizes this issue in an inspiring way:

Problematic members are a built-in challenge of the PLC. The PLC is a microcosm of life. There will always be people around us who will dominate in a negative way. We, as a community, need to learn from it and practice sensitivity and understanding. Most teachers have to deal with unpopular or resistant pupils in their class. According to Elana (LT), the presence of this member was "a learning experience" both for the lead teacher and for the participants as people and as teachers.

Another PLC leader, Kaila, explained that she "can't choose [her] PLC participants", just like a teacher can't choose her pupils for the most part. She felt that it wasn't her role as lead teacher to give answers to the group as to how to deal with the problematic member, rather "the group should deal with the challenge together." According to Aliza (P) the reason why these teachers weren't really suitable for the PLC was because "they didn't buy into the idea of a PLC...They weren't willing to hear advice from other teachers. Rotem (P) feels that it's important that potential PLC participants "know what to expect" from the PLC framework before they decide to join. One may conclude from Aliza and Rotem's comments that it is important to explain to potential participants the difference between a PLC and regular in-service professional development in order to filter out teachers that are not suitable for a PLC framework. In addition, it could be suggested that lead teachers meet participants before the PLC begins in order to check whether they are suitable for a PLC.

### ***Being attentive to the needs of the participants***

Consistent with the bottom-up approach of the PLC, the participants were invited to bring up topics that they wanted to deal with in the meetings in addition to the topic set by the Ministry about speaking in English. This aspect of bottom down was discussed by Buysse, who maintained that an essential element of the PLC was the teachers taking an active and responsible role in their own development and that the topics dealt with in the PLC would be relevant, meaningful and authentic to the participants (Buysse 2003, p267).

Mandy (LT) said that she always plans her sessions but is prepared to change what she has planned to suit the needs of her participants: "If a teacher brings up an issue, I'll change what I planned to do." Linda (LT) understood from her participants that they wanted something practical, tools that they could implement in their teaching, "not just a discussion." From the observation of the PLCs and interviews with PLC participants, the extent to which participants were engaged in the PLC was in most part due to the lead teacher.

### ***Being a facilitator and not an instructor***

Almost all the lead teachers interviewed or observed were English coordinators or pedagogical counselors and therefore they have a lot of knowledge and experience to share. According to the lead teachers interviewed, it was a challenge for these leaders to restrain themselves and not provide the knowledge in a top-down way. Elana herself mentioned that she had learned a lot about leadership through leading the PLC:

It's a big accomplishment to empower people and encourage people to give their own ideas, instead of me giving mine. In the beginning I felt in charge and then I learned to take a step back and let the participants be creative. I hold myself back

Mandy (LT) spoke about the expectations of the participants "It was a process to educate the participants that they don't need me to give them everything.

One may conclude that the role of the lead teacher is so essential to the success of the PLC that training for the PLC leaders needs to be ongoing and effective. PLC lead teacher training should continue to be run in a way that models the way PLCs should be facilitated. PLC lead teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their leadership styles and do peer observation of one another. The PLC for PLC leader sessions that this researcher observed were indeed run like a PLC with lead teachers bringing up case studies. The more teachers collaborate, find solutions together and build materials, the more confident and empowered they will feel (Frost 2012).

## **Learning environment**

### ***Sharing resources and good practices***

Being in a supportive community allows the teachers to see themselves as a resource for one another, not just as emotional support. Elana believes that one of the reasons teachers come to her PLC is because of the "great atmosphere...People feel equal and that enables real sharing." This feeling of equality was mentioned by Frost who spoke about the teacher members of the PLC as "knowledge creators" and "knowledge users" in "an egalitarian framework" (Frost 2012, p218).

One participant, Aliza, shared that she finds regular in-service training "demeaning" at times as opposed to the PLC which is "empowering":

[Presenters of traditional in-service training] are not usually in the classroom environment and they are not connected to our reality. [The PLC recognizes that] we as teachers are a huge asset and resource and utilizes us. I finally get to hear what other teachers are experiencing. This gives me confidence and helps my teaching.

This idea is supported by the article by Frost in which he asserts that the cooperative elements of the PLC, namely giving support, listening with respect and exchanging ideas contribute towards a greater feeling of self-esteem in the participating teachers (Frost 2012, p219). On the other hand, this researcher observed a PLC of Dasi and Sarah that was only thirty hours with two different lead teachers leading at different times. This group was a lot less cohesive evidenced by the fact that there was less participation and some of the participants were on their phones while other members were sharing ideas. Mandy (LT) maintained that if you want to create a community you have to meet frequently

### ***Active learning and experimentation***

One of the benefits of the PLC according to the participants interviewed was the opportunity to experiment with and explore new ideas and creative technological tools. Nava (P) spoke about the excitement new teachers in the PLC experienced when discovering and experimenting with new technological tools that they could use in class, "the PLC gives [you] a chance to experiment." Aliza (P) added that working with the actual tools in the PLC "made us more confident."

Elana (LT) said that for the most part teachers wanted to be challenged but some teachers didn't want to be active and experiment, especially in the evening after a long working day. Elana (LT)

comments that not every teacher comes to the PLC looking to be empowered and is willing to upgrade her teaching methods.

#### ***Application of new practices in the classroom***

Some teachers in the PLC felt that part of their role was to go back to their English staff and share with them the tools and ideas they had received in the PLC. Aliza (P) said,

We're all representatives. We're supposed to go back to schools and share what we've learned. I go back to weekly staff meetings and share and teachers are open to my sharing.

This finding concurs with Frost who spoke about how participants were "encouraged and inspired" to initiate change in the classroom (Frost 2012, p220).

Atara (P) used ideas from the PLC in her class for non-readers, like the English café. She took the basic idea from the PLC and adapted it to her class. She made the pupils waiters and prepared tables with tablecloths and cookies and they practiced speaking, "They loved it. It was nice to do something creative." Atara (P) said ...If you're not learning you're not moving as a professional." Even if most of the teachers interviewed didn't feel that their teaching philosophy as such had changed, the PLC gave them more confidence in areas that needed strengthening.

#### ***Reflective nature of the PLC***

Reflecting on teaching practices is one of the main components observed in the PLC sessions. I observed a reflective activity in Elana's PLC followed by a discussion. Elana then asked for feedback about the activity itself and how it could be used to promote speaking in the classroom. There was a double benefit to the activity: Firstly, the participants did self-reflection about teaching practice and then shared with the group as a whole. Secondly, by experienced the activity themselves they will be able to use it effectively in the classroom. This concurs with Pedder who found that teachers were reported as valuing CPD that involves current collaborative inquiry-based activities including experimenting with classroom practices, working together and adapting practice due to peer feedback and self-evaluation (Pedder 2008 in Frost 2012).

#### ***Group work and collaboration***

The method of instruction in the PLC is mainly working in groups and collaborating. I observed such a collaboration with engaged participation who expressed curiosity and empathy, both in the group discussions and also when the groups were presenting. This observation is in line with the research of Zhang who talked about the members building one another's strengths and engaging in "collective knowledge building" (Zhang 9)

As suggested by teachers interviewed, the collaborative method of the PLC could be used by the participants as a model for how they as teachers should teach in the classroom. It was clear to this researcher while observing the PLCs that while sharing ideas and tips for teaching is one of the main benefits of the PLC, the overriding advantage is the collaboration – building something together as a group. These findings regarding collaboration concur with the finding of Dierking and Fox that the goal of these learning communities is not only to access one another's materials but to create responsible "communities of experts" engaged in ongoing reflection and collaborating together to improve their own teaching practices (Dierking & Fox 2013, p141).[RB5]

#### ***Heterogeneous nature of the PLC***

##### ***Experienced and novice teachers***

All participants and lead teachers interviewed agreed that the combination of experienced and less experienced teachers was an advantage of the PLC. Elana (LT) said that the young teacher gets a boost of confidence because "she feels that she has something to give." Even the experienced teachers felt that it was a beneficial thing that less experienced teachers were there. Atara (P) said that she learned from the "new ideas of the young teachers, especially the technological tools and the fresh perspective they brought." Aliza (P) said that the "big difference in seniority in Elana's PLC led to respect for one another. Elana (LT) feels that not only do the inexperienced teachers gain from listening to the experienced teachers, but they also have something to give and "this raises their self-esteem."

A question that could be explored is why not enough novice teachers are attending the PLCs and what can be done to attract them. Yakira (LT) noted that despite the supportive environment she tried to provide, "fewer novice teachers remained in the PLC for a second year. It was definitely easier for the experienced teachers to feel comfortable"

#### ***Mixed high school and elementary school PLCs***

The question of whether the PLC should be a mix of high school and elementary school teachers brought different reactions. Some teachers felt that a mix of teachers was an advantage. Aliza (P) felt that it was an advantage for high school teachers because they "are too focused on the final exam and the elementary school teachers can remind them of the creativity of teaching English." She also felt that even in high school you have pupils whose English is actually on the level of elementary and the teachers could learn teaching strategies from the elementary school teachers. Rotem, an elementary school teacher in mixed PLC, feels that a mixed PLC enables the participants to see the whole picture...You have to know what's happening in education on all levels.

On the other hand, Elana, (LT), feels that there is a big difference between high school and elementary school teachers in terms of the level of their spoken and written English. "You need higher level English skills to teach on a high school level and so it is problematic to have a mixed PLC." Mandy (LT) said that the English level of some elementary school teachers in her PLC was not on a high level. However, she feels that the mixed PLC is an advantage because it is important to create a sense of community across grade levels. At the PLC for PLC leaders conference, lead teachers had different opinions on this issue. Most admitted that elementary and high school teachers don't usually want to be in a PLC together.

In summary, the reactions to a mixed PLC were mixed as they were in the Rama survey (Ramah 2017, p17) but more participants particularly high school teachers preferred PLCs being separate for elementary and high school teachers. A future research could compare the reactions of high school and elementary school teachers on this issue.

#### ***Native English speaking participants and non-Native English speakers***

In the Rama survey (2017) it was found that English speakers were critical of the low level of English of some of the non-native English speaking teachers. The Israeli teachers in turn were critical of the class management of the English speaking teachers. This researcher found that there was a majority of native English speakers in most of the PLCs surveyed. In Yakira's elementary PLC it was observed that the English speaking teachers dominated the discussion. Yakira (LT) said, "those who were concerned about making mistakes spoke less." When lead teachers were asked whether English speakers dominated in the PLCs most answered that they didn't see that. Elana said that "they were more reticent but they did participate when asked." Atara (P) said that "there was respect between colleagues, no judging." From the observation of this researcher of the different PLCs, it is clear to this researcher that more experienced native English speakers dominated the discussion. It is suggested to ask non-native English speakers what could enable them to be more actively involved in the PLC.

## Conclusion

The interviews with participants and lead teachers as well as the observations of the PLCs reflect that the PLC is a very positive and effective alternative model to a traditional top down in-service training. This research shows that the aspect of a supportive and safe community environment is a strong advantage of the PLC. Being able to share challenges in the classroom with teachers of the same discipline enabled the participants to feel validated and empowered. Being able to give input about what topics would be covered in the PLC, in line with the bottom-up approach, made the learning meaningful and relevant. Furthermore, the learning environment was perceived as beneficial, particularly the characteristic of sharing good practices, both by experienced and novice teachers. Some teachers even served as brokers of the new information to their school. The opportunity to reflect on teaching methods was a feature of the PLC that enabled its members to evaluate and improve as teachers. The hands on experimentation of new tools and ideas, enabled the teachers to feel like they could successfully implement these good practices in the classroom. Collaborating on ideas by working together in groups was a significant aspect of the PLC because it cemented the group together as a community and allowed them to create new materials together that could be used in the classroom. In actual fact, the PLC provides a microcosm for teachers to experiment with the 2020 classroom model by learning new technological tools and experimenting with collaboration and group work, thus experiencing active learning.

The interviews and observations brought out various challenges of the PLC for the lead teacher, for example how to manage participants who behave inappropriately in the sessions. Another challenge is how to involve all members, those whose spoken English is less developed, less experienced participants, shy members that find it difficult to participate or members that are in the PLC for the hours but are not interested in taking an active role. The lead teacher was seen as essential to the success of the PLC in how she created and sustained an encouraging and positive learning environment.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the PLC framework, factors like the facilitating abilities of the lead teacher, the characteristics of the participants and their prior attitude to the PLC framework all influence the levels of satisfaction of its participants and the success of the community and learning process. In the three years since the Ramah study was conducted, one can see that there has been an increase in the popularity of the PLC and its recognition by teachers as a valid and even preferable alternative to regular in-service training, evidenced by the rise in the number of PLCs. The observations of PLCs in this research showed high levels of participation and engagement while the participants interviewed, both lead teachers and participants, expressed excitement and positivity about the PLC as an alternative model of professional development.

From this researcher's observation of the PLC for PLC leaders session at the beginning of the school year 2019/2020, it was clear that there was a strong marketing effort by the lead teachers and the Inspectorate to attract teachers to join a PLC. These efforts should be accompanied by clear explanations as to what the elements of the PLC are and what is expected of the participants in order to prevent non-cooperative teachers from being part of these communities. In addition, as evidenced by the challenge of "problematic participants", it is important for PLC leaders to receive guidance and support in the form of their own PLC. This is important also in order to enable the PLC lead teacher to experience herself the advantages of a collaborative, reflective framework.. At the same time dealing with less desirable members of a community is part of the learning process of communities in general.

## Limitations and Recommendations

It would have been preferable to have interviewed lead teachers and participants from the same PLC's and observed those same PLCs in order to check impressions of lead teachers and their participants and their validity. This research is heavily weighted on the PLC of Elana, who was observed twice, interviewed twice and two of her participants were interviewed, which effectively makes this research a kind of case study. Secondly, in order to effectively examine the influence of factors like teacher experience and language of the participant on the effectiveness of the PLC, one would have to do a quantitative survey of a large number of PLCs. One could thereby evaluate why fewer novice teachers are signing up and staying in PLCs. Furthermore, one could interview non-native English participants of PLCs and determine how to increase the comfort level of these non-native English speakers in the PLC as well as improving their level of English.

In future research it is important to examine student outcomes and experience of their teachers who are attending PLCs, whether their teacher's participation in the PLCs has affected her teaching style in a significant way, resulting in more collaborative, active style learning.

From the in-depth interviews conducted with PLC participants, it is clear that the main motivation for attending the PLCs was because the hours of in-service training were needed to supplement salary and the PLC provides the required number of hours. The proximity of the PLC, being in the professional teacher training center, in some cases, the PLC wasn't chosen for professional training because of its unique elements rather because that was the in-service training offered that was closest. One of the difficulties that came out of the interviews was the overwhelming workload of the teachers and the lack of desire to take another in-service training in addition to the compulsory school in-service training of 30 hours that teachers are required to take. It is this researcher's suggestion to find a way to combine the compulsory school in-service training with a PLC in order that more teachers will be motivated to join a PLC.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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[RB1] This section would benefit from a clearer theoretical grounding in terms of research design (suggest grounded theory?), and research questions based on a theoretical framework for teacher learning (see Korthagen, 2010 for example). Without RQs, the findings seem somewhat unfocused

[RB2] Strengthen this statement – what IS it? Suggest grounded theory?

[RB3] You should present findings separately from discussion

[RB4] Indent quotes, and/or use quotation marks

[RB5] Connection to other research in discussion section