

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

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Summary

Based on qualitative research in 2019/2020 including in-depth interviews with ten lead teachers of PLCs and with six teacher participants, in addition to observations of both teacher PLCs and lead teacher sessions, the authors study the effects of Professional Learning Community (PLC), which has been adopted as an alternative model for professional development for English teachers in Israel. The conclusion is that PLC is an effective model of professional development for English teachers pointing towards factors concerning the facilitating abilities of the lead teacher, the characteristics of the participants and their prior attitude to the PLC framework as prerequisites for success

Definition of PLC is deficient

A professional learning community (PLC) is 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) (p. 2). This is a very unspecific definition compared to much more specific definitions suggested by e.g. NNN, which is problematic, not least as the paper several times refers to "The PLC" or "The PLC model". For me a group of people sharing a concern and/or interacting on an ongoing basis" is not "a PLC" or "a PLC model", but only an interaction group. This is even more problematic as it is difficult to develop a causal interpretation: What is the cause (is it that people share a concern or even a passion, and/or that they interact on an ongoing basis?), and what is the outcome?

The literature review is biased, and inclusion criteria are not clear

Very quickly the paper continues into referring a number of outcomes of PLCs such as having "a positive effect on the motivation of the participating teachers" and thereby "facilitating student growth". It is not clear whether these outcomes are identified through methodologically strong quantitative effect studies, qualitative descriptive studies or merely wishful

thinking. Anyway, with reference to a number of sources, the quality of which is not specified, the paper continues with a series of positive if-then statements: “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”; the PLC “reflects a bottom-up approach”, which “allows for intimate and individually-tailored learning”; the “active and collaborative process of discussion and sharing of ideas (...) 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’”; “the social dynamic of the PLC encourages teachers to explore new practices and apply them in the classroom”; etc. etc. For me this is rather a list of best possible worlds in a school context than solid empirical studies. If I was to summarize the strong empirical, effect oriented studies that I am aware of, PLCs – based on a more specific definition than found in this paper – has a significant, but weak positive effect on teacher satisfaction and an insignificant effect on learning outcome and wellbeing among students.

Success criteria?

When is teacher collaboration considered to be successful? Is it a matter of professional teacher satisfaction, improved professional practice, or students’ learning outcome and/or wellbeing? It seems for me to be unclear in the section concerning literature review etc. In the study presented in the paper fulfillment of success criteria are based on teachers’ self-evaluation with questions such as: “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?” (p. 3). Consequently, external outcome (improvement of learning outcome etc.) is not considered. This is a problem, because a number of PLC evaluation studies, which I have studied, conclude that teachers are happy with the PLC organization (presumably because it meets their professional demands), but also that no changes/improvements of student outcome have been found. Furthermore, it is a well-known bias that self-evaluation of success achievement among participants tends to be positive, simply because most participants like to participate in specially organized programmes.

Methodology

Methodology is generally speaking fine and transparent. However, when it is said that “The phenomenological methodology was used”, I suggest that it is changed to: “A phenomenological methodology was used”.

Discussion and conclusions

Five analytical themes are identified and discussed:

1. A sense of community: The importance of developing the PLC into a “safe environment” for the participants
2. The role of the lead teacher: He/she should be a facilitator rather than an instructor
3. Learning environment: The importance of creating a development and experimental oriented reflective learning environment
4. Group work and collaboration.

5. Heterogeneous nature of the PLC

The themes are relevant and interesting and the discussion fine. However, I have two critical observations: 1. The analysis seems more to function as an evaluation of the project, less to be a contribution to the general knowledge of PLCs. 2. The project seems to be a learning based competence development program rather than a PLC organization of school teachers.

Limitations and recommendations

Fully in line with my comments in this review the authors declare that the project should be identified as “a kind of case study”. For me – as already mentioned – the paper seems to be a kind of evaluation report. Similarly, I agree the in future research it is important to examine the effects on teaching style and student outcome, i.e. to make the study output and outcome oriented.

Suggested additional literature

As already mentioned I think that the literature review is too narrow a somewhat biased. As a result I suggest that for future work the following literature should be included.

Two classical studies of PLCs (that “set the scene”):

Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221–258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-006-0001-8>

Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and teacher education*, 24(1), 80–91. (this one is referred to in the paper)

Some important, recent studies not referred to in the paper:

Burns, M. K., Naughton, M. R., Preast, J. L., Wang, Z., Gordon, R. L., Robb, V., & Smith, M. L. (2018). Factors of Professional Learning Community Implementation and Effect on Student Achievement. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, 28(4), 394–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2017.1385396>

Datnow, A., & Park, V. (2019). *Professional Collaboration With Purpose: Teacher Learning Towards Equitable and Excellent Schools* (1. udg.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351165884>

Hargreaves, A. (2019). Teacher collaboration: 30 years of research on its nature, forms, limitations and effects. *Teachers and Teaching*, 25(5), 603–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1639499>

Hargreaves, A., & O'Connor, M. T. (2018). *Collaborative professionalism: When teaching together means learning for all*. Corwin Press.

Sigurðardóttir, A. (2010). Professional Learning Community in Relation to School Effectiveness. *Scandinavian Journal of*

Educational Research, 54(5), 395–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2010.508904>

Sleegers, P., den Brok, P., Verbiest, E., Moolenaar, N. M., & Daly, A. J. (2013). Toward Conceptual Clarity: A Multidimensional, Multilevel Model of Professional Learning Communities in Dutch Elementary Schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 114(1), 118–137. <https://doi.org/10.1086/671063>

Vangrieken, K., Dochy, F., Raes, E., & Kyndt, E. (2015). Teacher collaboration: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.04.002>

Weddle, H. (2022). Approaches to studying teacher collaboration for instructional improvement: A review of literature. *Educational Research Review*, 35, 100415. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100415>

Yuan, R., Zhang, J., & Yu, S. (2018). Understanding teacher collaboration processes from a complexity theory perspective: A case study of a Chinese secondary school. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(5), 520–537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1447458>

Minor linguistic problems

Finally, concerning language. Generally speaking the language is fine. However, I have found a few sentences that need to be corrected. E.g.:

p. 1: “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.” Something missing.

P. 3: “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).” Something missing before the quote.

P. 3: “professional and social ties over time and between meetings was not always maintained”. Replace “was” by “were”.