

# Fit for purpose? An analysis of the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities for continuous professional teacher development in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

To ensure quality teaching, teachers require continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) opportunities. In South Africa, CPTD faces many challenges however, including most notably budget constraints. Because they have been found to be cost-effective, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could constitute a promising way forward in the country. In a PLC, classroom teachers, school managers and/or subject advisors come together to collectively determine their CPTD needs and to set up activities that can help them meeting those needs. Hence, PLCs are needs-based driven and stimulate collaborative learning – characteristics of effective CPTD. In 2017-2018, the South African Department of Basic Education initiated 12 inter-school pilot PLCs among teachers of grade 1 to 6 in the provinces of Free State, North West and the Northern Cape. In this paper, we examine participating teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these PLCs, drawing on focus group discussions and chat box stories, and triangulate their impressions with PLC observations. We find that teachers perceive PLCs to be effective when they are (1) needs-driven, (2) supported by the school management, (3) skillfully facilitated, (4) based on mutual trust and respect, (5) regularly guided by input from external experts and (6) when participating teachers share a sense of collective responsibility for student learning. Promisingly, results also indicate that participation in PLCs increases collaboration among teachers.

**Key words:** Continuing professional teacher development; professional learning communities; South Africa

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we make use of monitoring data from a pilot on Professional Learning Communities. The pilot was conducted by the Department of Basic Education South Africa, in collaboration with the South African Council for Educators and VVOB South Africa – education for development. We thank all actors involved for their contributions.

## **Introduction**

Teachers and teaching quality have the single largest impact on learning outcomes (see e.g. Leu, 2004; Steyn, 2010). Continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) opportunities can help teachers to continuously improve their teaching skills, to the benefit of their learners. Yet not all forms of CPTD have a positive impact on teaching practices. International research shows that effective CPTD programmes are sustained in time, needs-based driven and sensitive and relevant to context. Other characteristics include a focus on subject content, grouping by grade or subject, and the use of active learning methodologies (for a discussion on effective CPTD programmes, see Popova et al., 2018; Steyn, 2010). Those CPTD programmes that link participation to incentives such as salary implications or promotion are also positively associated with gains in student learning (Popova et al., 2018).

Traditionally, CPTD is delivered through workshops, seminars, conferences or courses. Yet, in low- and middle-income countries the cascade model is most common because of budget constraints (Leu, 2004). A few master trainers provide training to a set of trainees – often at provincial or district levels – who in turn provide training to another group of trainees, until training has trickled down to the level of the ultimate beneficiaries, teachers. Although cost-effective in theory, in practice there is rarely a mechanism in place for the cascade model to work. The approach overly relies on those who attend the first training(s) to pass on knowledge to their colleagues, hence risking watering down and/or altering the information or even blocking the message from cascading down (Leu, 2004; Popova et al., 2018). Illustratively, in South Africa, teachers trained according to a cascade model complained about the lack of knowledge and skills on behalf of their direct trainers (see Ono & Ferreira, 2010). Furthermore, the cascade model has also been criticized for focusing on passive, rather than, active models of learning, especially in times of increased focus on critical-thinking and problem-solving approaches in education (Leu, 2004).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could provide an alternative way forward in low-resource contexts. In a PLC, classroom teachers, school managers and/or subject advisors gather to collectively determine their CPTD needs and to set up activities that can help them meeting those needs. PLCs meet many of the criteria of effective CPTD. Among others, they are sustained in time, needs-based driven and embedded in the local school context. And, like the cascade model,

PLCs are low in cost. But, most effectiveness research on PLCs has been conducted in high-resource contexts. To our knowledge, very little research has focused on PLCs in low- and middle-income countries, calling into question whether PLCs are effective in these settings too.

In 2017-2018, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE), in collaboration with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and VVOB South Africa – education for development, set up 12 pilot inter-school PLCs in the provinces of Free State, North West and the Northern Cape, gathering teachers teaching in grades 1 to 6. In this paper, we examine the effectiveness of these PLCs. Hereto, we make use of PLC observations, in combination with focus group discussions and chatbox stories that capture teachers' perceptions of effectiveness. Like in high-income countries, our findings show that PLCs constitute a cost-effective model of CPTD – and are perceived as such – that stimulate collaboration among teachers.

In what follows, we first briefly discuss the literature on PLCs followed by a description of the PLC pilot project in South Africa. Next, we present our methodology. In the third part, we analyse the results and discuss their implications. The last section concludes.

### **The effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities**

PLCs consist of a group of people “*sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, [and] growth-promoting way*” (Stoll et al., 2006: 223). In the school context, it concerns a community “*in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit*” (Hords, 1997: 1, in Stoll et al., 2006: 223). PLCs were first developed in the United States in the 1960s in response to pressures among teachers to keep up with educational reforms and learning. Through time, teachers became aware of the positive effect of participation in PLCs in terms of professional development. Hence, from the 1980s-1990s on PLCs were perceived as a model of teacher professional development (Borko, 2004). Often, PLCs are used interchangeably with Communities of Practice (CoPs).

Research shows that well-developed PLCs have a positive impact on teaching practices, and, in turn, on student learning (Vescio et al. 2008). “*Participation in learning communities,*” Vescio et al. (2008) explain, “*impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered.*”

Furthermore, participation would improve the teaching culture, by enhancing teacher collaboration, by empowering teachers and by stimulating continuous learning (Vescio et al. 2008). PLCs have been found to be particularly effective when they focus on collective learning (1); when they identify a common goal (2); when they are collaborative nature (3); when relationships are built on trust (4); and when participants are committed to continuous improvement and critical interrogation (5) (Katz et al., 2009; Vescio et al., 2008; Du Four, 2004; and Brodie, 2013). In the related CoP literature, there is also an emphasis on the need for supportive and shared leadership (see e.g. Hord & Sommers, 2008). Much of the empirical research on PLCs – and on CoPs for that matter – has been conducted in the USA however, calling into question the relevance and effectiveness of PLCs in low-resource contexts.

### **PLCs in South Africa: existing policies**

In South Africa, continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) is implemented and managed by the South African Council for Educators (SACE), the statutory body for professional teachers. SACE registers all starting teachers and follows up on their CPTD. As an incentive to invest in CPTD, teachers can earn points for participating in SACE-approved CPTD activities. *“Teachers who do not achieve a minimum number of CPTD points over two successive cycles of three years will be accountable to SACE for such failure”* (DBE, 2007:20). The activities of SACE are in accordance with the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED, 2011-2025). This strategic framework identifies PLCs as an important instrument for school-based professional development, due to their collaborative, cost-effective and self-driven nature. It defines PLCs as *“communities that provide the setting and necessary support for groups of classroom teachers, school managers and subject advisors to participate collectively in determining their own developmental trajectories, and to set up activities that will drive their development”* (DBE, 2011:14). In a first attempt to define Professional Teaching Standards, SACE reaffirms South Africa’s commitment to PLCs: *Teachers participate in endorsed continuing professional teacher development activities/programs organised by their subject associations, professional learning communities (PLCs), Higher education institutions, teaching unions or private providers* (draft SACE Professional Teaching Standards, 2018:2).

In 2015, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed guidelines to stimulate and support local education officials and other stakeholders to set up and maintain PLCs, all the while ensuring

their effectiveness. The guidelines put forward ten key characteristics of effective PLCs (DBE, 2015):

- Mutual trust and respect among participants
- Support challenges and constructive critique
- Shared vision and clear focus on ensuring learning for all pupils
- Collaborative and reflective enquiry
- Inclusive membership
- Leadership: supportive school management and distributed leadership
- Collective responsibility for student learning
- Coherent, responsive change in practice
- Regularity
- Systemic, rigorous enquiry into practice

In 2017-2018, the first 12 inter-school PLCs were established, located in 3 districts in the provinces of Free State, North West and the Northern Cape. Each PLC consisted of a maximum of 12 members from up to 6 schools. Participants included teachers from grades 1 to grade 6 (so-called foundation and intermediate phase), members of school management teams and teachers and coordinators in charge of respectively learning and school support. In between August 2017 and October 2018, each PLC organized at least 10 sessions after school hours that lasted on average two hours.

### **Methodology**

This study examines participating teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs in terms of CPTD, and how these perceptions correspond to the criteria identified by DBE and international research. To know how teachers' perceived PLC participation, we conducted 12 post-PLC focus group discussions (FGDs) of max. 1 hour. Although conducted in English, teachers could respond in their mother tongue. To minimize social desirability, we also recorded individual chatbox stories. At the end of the PLC pilot, teachers were invited to anonymously share a story about their participation in the PLC pilot by means of a tape recorder and in the language of their choice. During these recordings, no data collectors were present. We also observed 24 PLC sessions (2

per PLC), making use of a rubric informed by the PLC guidelines (DBE, 2015), in order to triangulate teachers' testimonies with their actual conduct during PLCs.

### **Essential ingredients of effective PLCs**

Notably, we observed an overall increase in the quality of the PLCs over the lifespan of the pilot. In terms of CPTD effectiveness, six essential ingredients emerged from teachers' evaluations. Teachers thought of PLCs as effective when they are (1) needs-driven, (2) based on mutual trust and respect, (3) steered by a sense of collective responsibility for student learning, (4) supported by the school management, (5) skillfully facilitated, and (6) regularly guided by input from external experts. While these ingredients echo international research (Katz et al., 2009; Vescio et al., 2008; Du Four, 2004; and Brodie, 2013), the importance of a skilled facilitator and of regular external input are not reflected in South Africa's PLC guidelines.

#### ***Needs based***

Results of the external observations, chat box stories and focus group discussions identified the needs-driven character of PLCs as a key ingredient for success. Teachers valued the autonomy on content, the practice-oriented, interactive approach and the opportunities to share case studies and strategies from the classroom with colleagues. Brodie (2013:6) already stated that the focus of the PLC is a crucial element: *"in order to have the greatest effect on student learning, the focus must relate to the instructional core – the relationship between teacher, student and content and involve a problem of practice based on learner needs."*

#### ***Mutual trust and respect***

According to Katz et al. (2009), trust is crucial to establishing productive relationships amongst PLC members. This finding was confirmed in our study, by both the members of the PLC through the chat box stories and focus group discussions as by the external observers of the PLCs. Participating teachers valued *"not feeling alone"*, *"feeling emotionally supported"*, and compared PLCs to *"a family"*. They appreciated the *"informal"* atmosphere, in which they felt *"free to talk"*. One teacher stated: *"The PLC helped us a lot, it gave us confidence, it gave us hope. That helping each other is our light in the future."*

### ***Collective Responsibility***

With respect to collective responsibility, teachers cited “*being prepared for a meeting*”, “*learning from each other*”, “*sharing practical ideas, thoughts, similar experiences and challenges*”. Through participation, teachers built up agency and took charge of their own professional development:

PLCs are a high quality programme whereby educators are helping each other. We are there for each other, we are there to teach each other methods, approaches and to face the challenges that we came across in our classrooms. It has changed us a lot, it has changed me a lot. So for me, I would like to take this program to the next level. I would like to motivate other educators, my colleagues actually, to join this PLC so that we can produce better results, we can have the better children for tomorrow, for our future.

### ***Support from School Management***

According to the literature, the role of school management is to motivate teachers to engage in PLCs and to create the necessary conditions for PLCs to take place, ranging from realizing a safe environment in which critical reflection can take place, to allocating time and providing resources (Van Grieken et al., 2017). Our pilot PLC members identified support from their principals and school management as critical to success. To provide support, they conceded that it seemed crucial to them for school management to fully grasp the concept of PLCs and acknowledge its contribution to CPTD.

### ***Facilitation Skills***

If the facilitator brings these right skills to the table, PLCs were perceived more successful than without such a facilitator. The following skills were deemed important: to respect the autonomy of teachers, to steer discussions, to arbitrate in case of disputes, to encourage everyone’s participation, to listen and advise and to keep challenging teachers. These skills are in line with the skills and responsibilities of facilitators put forward in the literature. According to Van Grieken et al. (2017), the role of the facilitator is to motivate PLC members and to build trust among them, all the while watching over the intended outcomes of the PLC. Rather than dominating the

discussion or imposing ideas, facilitators support discussions and intervene when those discussions risk to wander off.

### ***Inviting Experts***

Teachers also pointed to the role of external experts to provide external input and advise. Experts include education officials, university professors and representatives of private sector institutions or non-governmental organisations. In the absence of external input, PLC members have been found to focus on practices they already consider ‘good’ rather than looking for new approaches (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). It is positive in this respect that the PLC guidelines (DBE, 2015, p.10) stipulate that district education officials have to support PLCs through the provision of resources and expertise related to, among others, video analysis, development of teaching resources, the use of ICT, etc.

### **Barriers to effective PLCs**

The observations, FGDs and chat box stories also exposed a number of barriers to effective CPTD through PLCs. First, teachers faced challenges in finding transport. This was particularly challenging in rural areas, where teachers had to travel large distances. To share the burden between PLC members, a rotation system was put in place for the schools to host the different sessions. A second barrier identified by the members concerned the timing and duration of the PLC sessions. PLC sessions took place after school hours and lasted for about two hours. In this way, the PLCs did not interfere with teaching schedules, but did add to the workload of PLC members. Third, not all teachers were as motivated to participate in PLCs. Some PLC members were rather passive, others even dropped out. This negatively affected trust among PLC members. Fourth, some schools did not dispose of the necessary resources to organize PLC sessions. When setting up inter-school PLCs, more and less affluent schools were put together. The school management of the latter type of schools felt less able to organize PLCs than the former. Lastly, teachers felt that DBE prioritized CPTD workshops over PLCs, affecting teachers’ motivation to invest time and effort in PLCs. There were even some cases of training fatigue.



## **Conclusion and discussion**

While PLCs have consistently been identified as an effective way to deliver continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) in high-resource settings, the current study examined the effectiveness of PLCs in the low-resource context of South Africa. In 2017-2018, 12 inter-school pilot PLCs were set up in the provinces of Free State, North West and Northern Cape. Drawing on external observations, focus group discussions (FGDs) and chatbox stories by PLC members, we examined what characteristics define effectiveness in the South African context. Our findings show that teachers think of PLCs as effective when they are (1) needs-based driven, (2) based on mutual trust and respect, (3) steered by a sense of collective responsibility for student learning, (4) supported by the school management, (5) skillfully facilitated, and (6) regularly guided by input from external experts. These characteristics are in line with international research on PLCs (Katz et al., 2009; Vescio et al., 2008; Du Four, 2004; and Brodie, 2013). We also found that participation in PLCs stimulates teacher collaboration.

This paper primarily examined teachers' perceptions of effectiveness. It did not establish whether the 12 pilot PLCs are objectively effective, i.e. whether they have an impact on teaching practices and, ultimately, on learning outcomes. Further research is needed to determine possible effects. Readers should also note the scope of the study. As a pilot study, it was confined to three districts within the provinces of Free State, North West and Northern Cape, and is therefore not representative of the general South African context.

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