
An Investigation Into the Development of a Professional Learning Community in a Maltese Primary Church School

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the collective capacity of teachers to form a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to target professional development in teaching Maltese to primary students at a church school in order to increase student achievement. Through a collaborative action research process, it frames the development of a PLC with twelve teachers and one Assistant Head through an insider's perspective on teachers' collaboration in inquiring into innovative pedagogical practices and forming an action plan. This study employed a multi-method qualitative approach incorporating participant observations and semi-structured interviews along with field observations and a reflective journal. The findings from this study revealed that when teachers and SLT members work collaboratively towards a shared vision, they yield positive results. However, their efforts are sometimes weakened due to a rigid system that hinders the change process. Various implications are provided for consideration to encourage effective PLCs. This research provides findings-based recommendations for educators and educational leaders who would wish to embark on a journey to develop and nurture a PLC in a primary school in order to improve student achievement in an area of concern.

Keywords

Professional Learning Communities, Professional Development, Teacher Leadership, Multi-Method Approach, Collaborative Action Research, School Improvement

Introduction

The need for schools to cultivate a high level of innovative teaching and learning approaches for 21st-century learners is progressively becoming

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more widespread as social, political, and economic pressures continue to increase (Owen, 2014). This is particularly pertinent in a bilingual country like Malta where societal bilingualism prevails in formal schools, with Maltese being the predominant language among students in state schools and English the prevalent language in church and independent schools (MEDE, 2015). One possible reason could be owed to the fact that students in church and independent schools are taught to read and write in English before Maltese, and another – the increased number of foreigners on the island (MEDE, 2015). Moreover, according to the recent *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS), which targets pupils aged 10 in their 4th grade, Maltese church and independent schools demonstrated a decrease in their students' performance due to Maltese being the test language (MEDE, 2016a). As a result, the Maltese government has recently launched *A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo* to promote bilingual development in Maltese and English for students (MEDE, 2016b). Furthermore, the Maltese Education Minister has recently called for an increase in Maltese language presence in digital resources, citing the risk of 'digital extinction' for the language (Farrugia, 2019).

'St Emilia', a pseudonym, is a Maltese primary church school which provided the research site, and the researcher was an Early Years teacher at the school at the time of the study with first-hand experience with the struggle to increase pupils' academic success in Maltese language acquisition. This context was significant since the school had begun to encourage a school-based PLC to improve school effectiveness in this area. This stemmed from the SWOT analysis carried out by staff members during the process of the school's internal review in 2016, which identified that pupils were finding Maltese challenging. Consequently, the researcher became motivated to propose this area for research to her colleagues to work together to enhance teaching and learning in Maltese to increase student achievement.

The vast body of research on PLCs provides a wide range of benefits as well as challenges in developing and nurturing PLCs, yet each experience is different according to the research context in which PLCs are set up (Bolam et al., 2015). The study investigated the following research questions from an insider-researcher position:

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- What are the benefits experienced by teachers when they participate in a PLC?
 - What challenges do teachers face to maintain their commitment towards a PLC?
 - How can the SLT develop and nurture PLCs in their primary school?

PLC Framework

International and local research indicates that PLCs have the potential to foster a collaborative culture amongst the teaching staff and enrich students' school experience (Alzayed & Alabdulkareem, 2020; Bezzina & Farrugia, 2018; Bezzina & Testa, 2005; Bezzina, 2008; Hord, 1997; Johannesson, 2020; Owen, 2014; Stoll et al., 2006), notwithstanding the challenges that school leaders and teachers may face (Harris & Jones, 2010). Bezzina and Calleja (2017) argue that schools may build a culture of effective teaching through continuous collaborative engagement and PD, and PLCs provide a learning environment for exchanging ideas, know-how, and practice. In support of the same idea, a recent change in the sectoral agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (MEDE, 2018) provided a shift from instructional teacher training, namely from in-services courses on supposedly new teaching strategies, to a culture of collaboration amongst teaching staff to undertake management driven CoPE (Community of Professional Educators) sessions to target the respective needs of the school, which are dedicated to school development planning and to other initiatives that facilitate professional discussion.

The origins of the PLC concept can be traced back to the 1960s and the 1990s, when educators sought to break free from classroom isolation imposed by decades of prescribed educational reforms (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis et al., 2010). Since the pivotal framework of PLCs was developed, it has become an investment in teachers' professional growth while allowing them to be more autonomous and have access to the school's decision-making process, to implement potentially powerful practices, and to increase student achievement (Bolam et al. 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2016; DuFour, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). Hord (2004), a prominent researcher of PLCs, argues that they are an ongoing process striving for long-term goals. DuFour et al. (2016) agree that it is not a programme but rather a cyclical process that requires the teaching staff's commitment to improve their practices as they engage in continuous collective inquiry and collaborative action research in order to increase student achievement in an area for improvement that focuses on learning rather than

teaching. Moreover, the emphasis of a PLC is not just on teachers' individual learning, but on collective knowledge that takes place in a context of reciprocal trust and joint learning (Harris & Jones, 2010). Furthermore, local studies by Bezzina (2008), Bezzina and Farrugia (2018), and Bezzina and Testa (2005) also cite the potential benefits that PLCs foster. Therefore, as argued by DuFour (2004), PLCs comprise a group of teachers in a grade-level or area of common interest who hold themselves accountable in an ongoing research process while working collaboratively to identify innovative pedagogy and share good practices to improve student learning.

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the process of developing a PLC in the primary church school where the researcher works with the participation of 12 Early Years teachers and 1 Assistant Head (AH). The study was informed by the research conducted by Uribe (2019) that used the 'expert-infused PLC model': participant collaboration together with self-exploration in addition to professional development (PD) by an independent field expert. By adopting a mixed methods approach, the researcher collected ethnographic data through conducting participant observations during 9 PLC meetings, taking field notes, and maintaining a reflective journal. The team met approximately every month between October 2021 and March 2022. Subsequently, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the AH for the Early Years, who participated in this study for a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the development of a PLC.

Throughout the research, the researcher adopted a constructivist epistemological and realist ethnography ontological approach which assumed that local meaning is ad hoc in social situations and that it differs from one setting to the next (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). According to Hammersley (2002), this means that there is a reality that exists independently of the researcher and whose nature can be determined, and that the goal of research is to generate an account that conforms to that reality. Thus, implying a subjective view on reality as the nature of knowledge in a constructivist approach is idiographic (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012), meaning that it is specific to the context and the people forming part of that context at a particular time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence a total immersion in the research context is required to achieve understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher sought to understand the experience

of the participants forming a PLC. Thus, this study is considered ethnographic since it focused on the experience of a group of people in a single setting, while data analysis involved evaluating the meanings, goals, and effects of human activities and institutional processes, as well as their implications in local and perhaps larger settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

As an insider at the data collection site, the researcher carried out action research, which according to Herr and Anderson (2014) aims to solve a particular problem in a practice-based environment. More specifically, collaborative action research was the most appropriate methodological approach to be adopted since it “is a process that enables teachers to improve the teaching-learning process while also contributing to the development of their own profession” (Sagor, 2005, p. 6). In addition, Rowell (2019) argues that collaborative action research has recently been explicitly attached to the concept of PLCs in education, by Sagor since 2010 and DuFour from 1947.

Since action research throughout the literature is presented as an action-reflection process (Banegas & Consoli, 2020; Mertler, 2017), each PLC meeting agenda was prepared and shared with the intention of guiding the participants to reflect before an upcoming meeting. Prior to the first PLC meeting, the researcher invited the participants to perform a reflective exercise on two main aspects: to identify the difficulties encountered while teaching Maltese to their students; and to think of a vision for their students regarding achieving higher levels of learning in Maltese. This was meant to enable the participants to collectively define a clear and compelling purpose for the PLC since, according to DuFour et al. (2016, p. 27), “if a mission is to be truly shared, it must be co-created, not sold and co-creation requires a process that fully engages others”.

In December 2022, an expert in the field of teaching Maltese in the primary was invited to conduct a CoPE session with the participants to discuss common issues that the participants were having and to provide training on new techniques. She gave the team insights on didactics in Maltese teaching and instruction, and shared pedagogical practices through examples and workshop exercises. Following the CoPE session with the field expert, the PLC performed an exercise of Keep, Drop, Create. This helped the Year Group teachers carry out a process of identifying essential curriculum, nonessential curriculum, and curriculum gaps to prioritise standards while creating more clarity on what the teachers were to teach since, according to DuFour et al. (2016), by removing

the burden on teachers to just cover content, it allows them to embrace more in-depth education. Other sessions included PD for participants by a Maltese teacher in the secondary school to brush up their Maltese orthography and grammar in terms of the language updates by the National Council for the Maltese Language (MEDE, 2008, 2018a).

During the PLC meetings, the participants were encouraged to evaluate current pedagogical practices, inquire about new practices, innovate and share ideas. They were invited to participate in an online bulletin board using Padlet. The online platform enabled instant sharing of photos related to Maltese and cross-curricular activities and lessons, links to videos, episodes of incidental learning and resources among the participants. In between PLC meetings, the participants engaged in sub-group meetings with their year group. This continued to enable collaborative inquiry which, according to Sagor (2010), a PLC simply cannot function without.

The researcher conducted participant observation during the meetings with the researcher's observation activities being secondary to her role as a PLC participant. Additionally, being an insider-researcher allowed informal corridor discussions with different participants who approached the researcher to give their feedback about the PLC meetings, which were also documented in the researcher's journal. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the teachers and the AH to draw out the PLC experience from another two perspectives besides the researcher's, which, according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), corresponds to the constructivist approach as the researcher participates together with the participants in producing knowledge.

By the end of the scholastic year 2021/2022, the PLC together with the AH for the Early Years arrived at an action plan to be implemented in the following scholastic year with detailed steps outlining the process to be adopted to help all learners show improvement in their overall Maltese language skills. Consequently, this study served as a foundation for future development since the intention of a PLC is to foster perpetual innovation and experimentation as a way of leading habitual practice (DuFour et al., 2016).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher followed the ethical procedures of the IfE and kept ethical considerations in mind throughout all the phases of the research process by

following the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (2011). This comprised informing the participants of the study in advance to help them make an informed decision prior to the commencement of the study, asking for voluntary informed consent, maintaining openness and disclosure about the research, informing them of their right to withdraw, and ensuring their right to privacy of their identity following the Data Protection Act (2018) and the General Data Protection Regulation (EU GDPR, 2018). The researcher was a member of the school community at the time, who ensured respect towards her colleagues and guaranteed that they feel that their participation was a choice and not an obligation towards the researcher (McIntyre, 2008). Furthermore, the participants were informed of the research endeavour at every stage (Locke et al., 2014). The findings were shared within the PLC throughout the research process and in the outcomes of the action research study. The participants were invited to review the findings from the interviews to ensure that they are an accurate interpretation of their experience.

Data Analysis

Based on the research questions, the researcher predetermined codes according to those that emerged from the literature review. The field notes that were recorded in the researcher's journal during the observations were analysed using a combination of predetermined as well as emerging codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which served as a guide for the ensuing semi-structured interviews (Murray, 2018). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and a general database was created. The process of coding the data was exercised through the use of MAXQDA2020 whereby codes and themes were placed into a concept map which assisted the researcher to visualise how they were related, aiding a comparison of interrelated data traits to identify theoretical concepts pertaining to the PLC framework. Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide a visual of the unrefined themes pertaining to each research question. The researcher began to assign meaning to the descriptions and inferences of the data collected from the participants' responses about their experience, interdependently making comparisons with the data gathered from the field notes. After reaching data saturation, the researcher finally came up with a map of superordinate themes, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 5

Themes pertaining to the benefits experienced by teachers

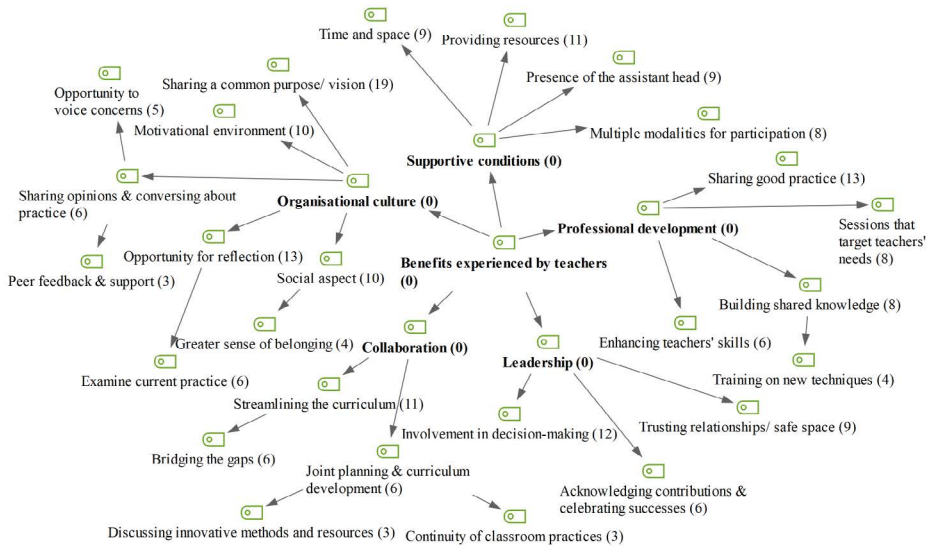


Figure 6

Themes pertaining to the challenges faced by teachers

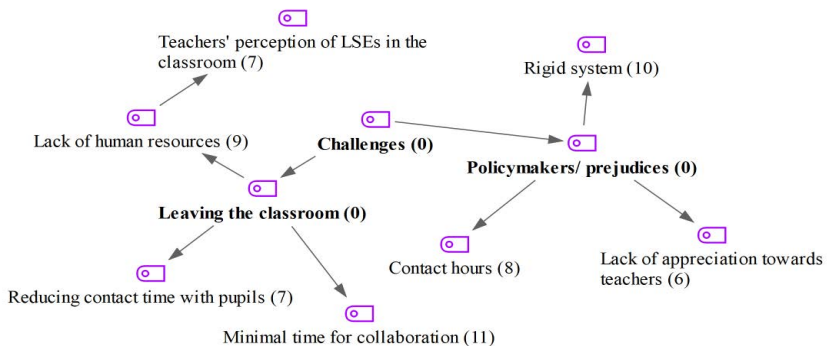


Figure 7

Themes pertaining to SLT qualities that develop and nurture PLCs

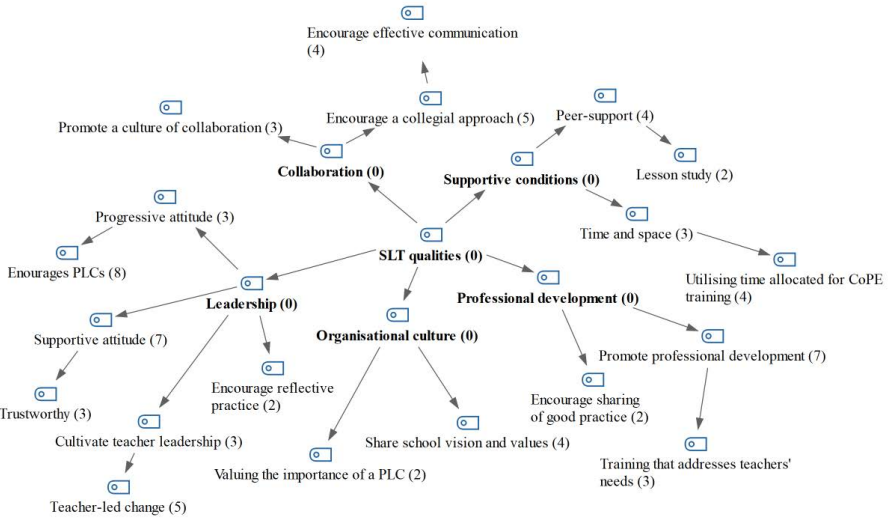
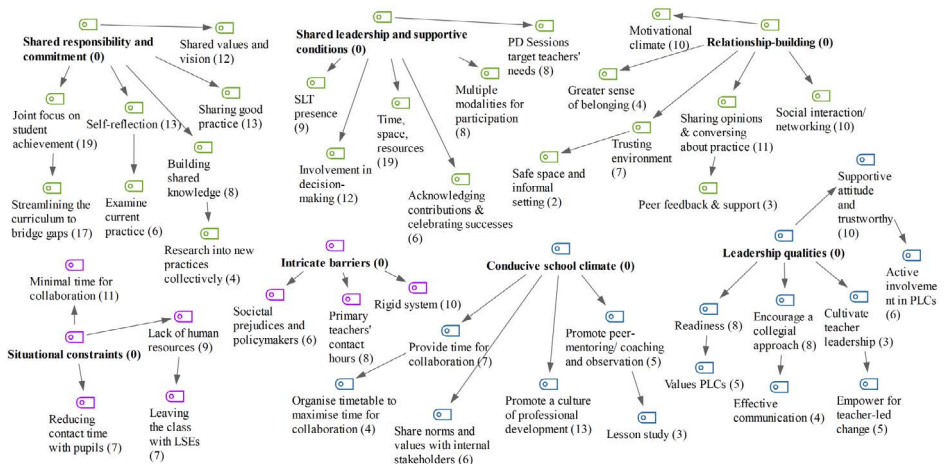


Figure 8

Map of superordinate themes and subordinate themes



Findings and Discussion

The data analysis procedure led to the identification of seven superordinate themes. Through an idiographic approach, the participants' responses were uniquely interpreted, yet similar indications from the participants pointed towards several benefits, challenges they encounter that impede collaboration, and a set of SLT qualities that help them form PLCs.

Benefits of Participating in a PLC

The first research question addressed the benefits that participants experienced when participating in a PLC. Key benefits stemmed from participants' collaboration on issues related to pedagogy, the curriculum and PD, which, according to Goddard et al. (2007), are directly linked to improved student achievement on high-stakes assessment results.

Shared Responsibility and Commitment. Committing to the vision of the school towards improving student achievement in Maltese was evident throughout the process of the PLC. In line with DuFour et al. (2016), the study confirmed that shared ownership of a vision helped the teachers reach a common goal. This joint focus on student achievement led to uncovering gaps in the curriculum as the teachers took part in discussions across different Year Groups. Subsequently, the PLC served as a medium to streamline the curriculum to bridge the gaps. Simultaneously, reflection was also consistent as the participants discussed ways of how they could be more effective for students who were struggling to master essential learning outcomes in Maltese lessons while trying out new strategies. The study indicated that the PLC brought about *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action* which, according to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 98), "are central to professional practice, and both of them benefit from practice". Teachers build knowledge through regular group-sharing as they are exposed to a variety of ideas and experiences (Many & Sparks-Many, 2015). Through this social experience, participants "felt more motivated to try out the ideas that were shared among us" (T6). It was noted how practical examples and experiences shared were also enriching to participants who were newly qualified, citing professional growth hence supported the aspect of learning from each other as a by-product of effective PLCs (Bolam et al., 2015; DuFour et al., 2016; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013).

Relationship-Building. The responses gathered from the majority of participants indicated an increase in motivation towards collaboration and improvement. They encouraged each other to collaborate, and supported one another with feedback, which created a motivational climate throughout the PLC process. Motivational factors influence motivated behaviour, particularly professional learning and teaching behaviour (Thoonen et al., 2011). From the participants' responses it was gathered that providing them with reflective questions before and after each meeting kept them motivated to continue to work towards improvement and they "looked forward to meeting together to discuss" (T2). Just like Fulton et al. (2005, p. 4) say that it is time for teachers in the 21st century to shift from "solo teaching in isolated classrooms", findings confirm that participants focused on inquiry-based learning and shifted from being in isolation to learning to work collaboratively while they shared their opinions and conversed about practice, which helped them "build stronger relationships and learn from each other" (T9). As indicated in the participants' responses, shared ideas and commitment towards improvement were simultaneously nurtured through the PLC. As a participant-observer, the researcher noticed how teachers were not afraid to differ in their opinions during the meetings. This facilitated productive discussions that led to consensus about teaching areas in the curriculum. Furthermore, it also led to establishing a good level of trust between them, which was enhanced through peer feedback and support.

Shared Leadership and Supportive Conditions. The majority of teachers felt that they were taking part in the decision-making of the school indirectly, as the AH heard their views and accepted the changes that they wanted to make. The general feeling was that teachers had been longing for involvement in decision-making for a while, as T2 argued that "finally we had a say because before we just had a set syllabus and we had to stick to it." Through this study, it seemed that together they had more strength in making the changes that they had hoped for. The participants' responses indicated that the PLC encouraged the approach of distributed leadership between the AH and the teachers through mutual collaboration and involvement in decision-making, which are additional attributes in several PLC models (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, 2004; Kruse et al., 1994; Stoll et al., 2006). Some of the participants remarked that the AH served an important role as a member of the SLT, providing insightful knowledge and taking an active part during the PLC meetings. This is in line with Bryk et al.

(2010), who argue that the growth of a PLC depends on strong enlightening leaders who stay the course and guide the team through a coherent strategic plan. From the participants' responses it was gathered that the AH's approach was vital in leading the change process for teachers to improve their practice and to serve their students better. Moreover, the teachers remarked that the AH's supportive disposition and affable demeanour provided the team with the support that they needed to continue to improve as "she was always understanding and open to listen to our ideas" (T9). Her presence showed that she embraces a transformational leadership style, ready to encourage and to support teachers in a mutual purpose to reach the desired vision, which is key for "successful improvement" according to Bezzina (2008) and Bezzina and Testa (2005). In addition, the PLC gave the participants "the opportunity to appreciate each other's work as well" (T2).

The results indicated that when structuring time, providing space, and requesting resources, teachers embrace structured initiatives. It was interesting to observe how teachers made more effort to attend PLC meetings in comparison to coordination meetings or simply having a quick unstructured meet-up with colleagues of the same year group, indicating a knock-on effect that such meetings can have on maintaining teachers' commitment towards a PLC. Resources help teachers facilitate enriching and meaningful learning for their students. The results from the participants' responses confirm that having the support of the SLT when teachers requested resources to be able to perform better teaching and support their students is essential: "they could actually help us implement the things we were discussing" (T6).

During the PLC process, there were instances when participants approached the researcher and remarked that they favoured PD sessions that target their area for improvement because the tendency is that teachers are prescribed sessions which do not always target their needs. As a result, it can be frustrating for them. However, when sessions are tailor-made for teachers' needs, they yield positive results. They had praise for the guest speaker who was regarded as a knowledgeable expert, and remarked that they received insightful knowledge on effective techniques that target student achievement based on their difficulties. This helped them feel "surer of what we are doing because we are researching and getting the support that we need to train ourselves and to help us reflect" (AH).

Challenges to Sustain Professional Collaboration

During analysis of the participants' responses, it emerged that one of their main challenges was attributed to situational constraints such as having a full timetable and an overloaded syllabus that normally lessen their availability to collaborate with colleagues, as time is one of the main sources of stress for primary teachers (Kokkinos, 2007).

Situational Constraints. All the teachers remarked that they favoured collaborative work; however, their responses indicated that they do not have time to collaborate during school hours unless they are provided with structured time to meet with their colleagues, and "when we do, we do not have teachers to replace us" (T10). Handing over their students to the class LSEs meant that they were taking away the learning of their students for their own professional gain and placed a burden on their colleagues. They felt that it was their burden to carry and saw it as unfair on the LSEs. Thus, considering the sense of respect towards LSEs that was brought up by a significant number of teachers' responses, the data corresponds to the beliefs found in Butt and Lowe (2011) that 'teaching assistants', which is the equivalent term for LSEs, is limited to supporting children with specific needs rather than assisting the teaching and learning process of all students, even though this was not indicated by the majority of the participants. This signifies that clarity on the role of LSEs in the classroom as articulated in the sectoral agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (MEDE, 2018b) is needed in order to raise awareness for both parties that the LSEs' assistance is essential, for instance when the teacher needs to attend a PLC meeting for collaboration or PD, because ultimately, students benefit if their teachers are more skilled and better prepared.

Intricate Barriers. According to participants' responses, an intricate barrier was related to lack of recognition as professionals, which led to a rigid system and the prevalence of a top-down management approach by policymakers. Participants felt that even though through the PLC process they had a say in subject-related procedures and aspects of the curriculum, they still felt that they were constrained by a rigid system that at times defeats the initiatives they desire to take. The participants' responses indicated that there needs to be more consultation with stakeholders when it comes to planning the curriculum and implementing systematic changes. Fullan (2015, p. 24) encourages the

concept of leadership from the middle as a school management approach, maintaining that “top-down leadership doesn’t last even if you get a lot of the pieces right, because it is too difficult to get, and especially to sustain, widespread buy-in from the bottom”.

Despite teachers’ willingness to collaborate and improve, there seems to be little regard for the lack of time in the primary teachers’ timetable to participate in a PLC during their contractual hours. According to the AH, “unfortunately the teacher’s contact hours in the primary are different to those in the secondary”, referring to the sectoral agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (MEDE, 2018b), suggesting that it is difficult for school leaders to implement structural changes for school improvement when they do not have the backing of the authorities concerned. Furthermore, according to Helterbran (2008), teachers frequently refer to themselves as professionals, but they recognise that they are rarely accorded the same level of respect, rewards, or recognition as other occupations because those who provide services to children and youths are frequently held in lower regard than those who provide similar services to adults, which was substantiated in some of the participants’ responses.

SLT Implications for Successful PLCs

Despite the established benefits of PLCs, this study intended to address the challenges of fostering collaborative professionalism in such communities and to identify specific measures school leaders could implement to simultaneously empower teachers and sustain effective PLCs. Thus, the participants were asked to describe how an SLT can develop and nurture PLCs in their primary school.

Leadership Qualities. PLCs require not only the readiness of teachers to implement constant systematic practices but also the readiness of school administrators (Noor, 2020). The SLT’s readiness to support the PLC was evident in this research, which, according to DuFour et al. (2016), is an essential requirement for teachers to be able to form a PLC, as it strengthens the commitment of teachers to work collaboratively towards shared vision, mission, values and goals. The AH valued the importance of PLCs because she maintained her support and encouraged the participants throughout. She recognised the potential that PLCs can have in upskilling teachers and how they

can contribute to raising the standards of professionalism among the teaching community in the school, as she argued that "it's not just about cooperation. It helps the teacher to improve her professional edge."

The majority of the participants' responses centred around the aspect of collegiality that needs to be encouraged by the SLT. Considering this, the AH remarked that certain teachers sometimes need to be convinced to break away from stagnant practices and to innovative ones, as they "are scared to explore uncharted waters if they are not encouraged and persuaded", implying that there needs to be a bit of a push from the SLT for teachers to collaborate and innovate. Thus, findings confirm those of OECD (2019), which denote the important challenge that school leaders face to foster an environment open to innovation. Hargreaves (1994) classifies this as contrived collegiality, which is discovered when the SLT facilitate collaboration and collegiality by consulting with their teaching staff and holding them accountable for the time allocated for collaborative work, yet allow them to be flexible and do not enforce control. Considering this, some of the participants' responses indicated that they were aware that the encouragement of the SLT to work collaboratively with their colleagues is important to establishing collegiality.

The responses from the participants suggested that not only could they be leaders in their classrooms but also in the school. Thus, the PLC encouraged teacher leadership, which was recognised as something that needs to be put to good use when it comes to making systematic changes in the school. Instances of responses from the participants indicated that the role of teacher leadership should shift from being a "representative of change" to becoming a "leader of change" (Wilson, 2016). Moreover, Hallam et al. (2015, p. 210) state that "long-term effectiveness requires that leaders be perceived as trustworthy and competent leaders". Having a school leader who is trustworthy was one of the qualities mentioned by most of the participants.

Conducive School Climate. Even though the participants had not yet experienced working collaboratively across the different year groups, collaboration amongst them was immediately endorsed. Like Bezzina (2008) and Bezzina and Testa (2005), their responses indicated that a greater sense of belonging, stronger relationships, empowerment to improve current practices, involvement in decision-making, and an overall conducive school climate brought about a culture of professional learning for all.

As time constraint was the most challenging factor for the participants, their responses indicated that time for collaboration needs to be prioritised when the SLT organise their timetable. Teachers find it hard to work on a project outside their contractual hours; therefore, educational leaders need to find ways of how staff members can engage in collaboration during their contractual day (DuFour et al., 2016). In this case, maximising time for collaboration by utilising CoPE session time for PLC meetings was favoured by the participants. Their responses indicated that generally these hours are allocated for training on topics that treat teachers as passive learners or are unrelated to the support they require in their daily practice. Therefore, conducting a PLC meeting during CoPE time increases the supportive conditions for teachers to collaborate within their contractual hours. In addition, participants felt that it would be vital for internal stakeholders to be informed of the norms and values that the PLC would be working towards achieving, especially when it comes to LSEs.

One of the strands of PD is organised around the notion of reflective practice. Hargreaves and Dawe (1990, p. 229–230) highlight that “reflective practice brings together the principles of practicality, collegiality, and reflection as a basis for professional development”. For this reason, a culture of reflective practice needs to be promoted among the teaching staff as found in this study, as participants suggested that reflective practice was an integral aspect for the PLC to make progress.

Practical Implications of the Study

The aim of this study was to influence future policymaking that considers the strong need for an increase in supportive conditions for primary teachers to be able to collaborate further and form a PLC. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that overload, isolation, rising expectations, contradicting demands, and a lack of a true venue for regular teachers to speak up appear to be constant companions of teaching and the work that teachers perform, some of which were also indicated by the current research findings. Thus, better consultation with primary teachers from the Education Department is needed to provide improved conditions that increase aspects of collegiality, teacher leadership and professional development which target higher levels of learning to increase student achievement, especially in areas where our students might be failing.

Moreover, “although PLCs have common characteristics and adopt similar processes, the practical implications for developing a PLC can only be understood and worked out in the specific conditions – like phase, size and location – of particular contexts and settings” (Bolam et al., 2005, p. i). In view of this, the current study provides a model for educational leaders who would consider embarking on this venture in their primary school. It also serves as a test phase which paves the way for a journey of further exploration into how PLCs can be developed in the upper primary and even in the secondary years.

Recommendations

PLCs have been moderately explored in the local scenario; albeit the work carried out by Bezzina (2008), Bezzina and Testa (2005), and Bezzina and Farrugia (2018) provided extensive insights that helped guide certain aspects of this research, further exploration of the long-term effectiveness on student achievement through PLCs is yet to be studied in the local context. Thus, it is suggested that future research addresses this area further. Moreover, considering the participants’ responses in this study, future research can also explore the effectiveness that this study had on teachers’ professional development and devise a way forward to continue to address student achievement with a focus on formative assessment. Furthermore, stemming from the work of DuFour et al. (2016), which is based on large-scale school districts, developing PLCs can be further explored across the State School College networks or alternatively across church schools or independent schools in Malta who would collaborate and explore how practices for improved teaching and learning can be performed together by establishing a formal PLC with external contributors and not just internal stakeholders.

Conclusion

The key findings of this multi-method qualitative study revealed seven superordinate themes, which were viewed as the main dimensions encountered that marked the process of developing a PLC in a primary church school from an insider’s perspective, providing a rich account of the teaching staff and the SLT members’ lived experiences. Consequently, participants gave a reliable insight into the research context that this study set out to investigate for educators and educational leaders who would want to embark on the journey of developing a PLC in their school. Findings suggest that PLCs have potential in upskilling teachers and establishing collegiality, and that when SLT members

involve themselves in PLCs and provide a trusting and safe space, PLCs can thrive and bring about a less rigid school system.

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Notes on contributor

Stephanie Zammit Dimech graduated from the University of Malta in 2014 with a B.Ed. (Hons) in Primary Education specialising in the Early Years, and has a Master's degree in Applied Educational Leadership from the Institute for Education. She has eight years of teaching experience in the Early Years and works part-time as a Course Coordinator at the IfE, assisting lecturers and providing a positive learning experience for educators seeking professional development. Her areas of interest are pedagogy and child development, professional learning communities, professional development, and educational leadership.

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