

Leafap

Literature Review on Leading and Facilitating Professional Learning Communities – in Norway



Anne Berit Emstad

Bård Knutsen

Trondheim, 2023

Content

Introduction.....	3
<i>Academic articles:</i>	3
<i>Academic books/booklets:</i>	5
1. PLC understanding and setting	6
2. View on inquiry & reflection	6
<i>Inquiry</i>	6
<i>Reflection</i>	7
3. General support for PLCs and differentiation of helping roles	7
4. Difficulties helping roles face and solutions reported by experience and data	8
5. Conclusions for PLC leadership and facilitation from an inquiry-based and reflective perspective.....	9
Authors	9

Introduction

The following document reports on eight published articles and three scientific books, where the topic of facilitation/leadership of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is addressed in studies in Norwegian settings. Two databases (Oria) and the search engine Google Scholar were used to search for relevant articles and books.

Academic articles:

[1] Fimreite. (2022). Rettleiarrolla i kollegaretteleiing som profesjonelt læringsfelleskap i barnehagen. *Nordisk Barnehageforskning*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.23865/nbf.v19.233>

Translation of reference:

Fimreite. (2022). Guidance role in peer guidance as a professional learning community in the kindergarten. *Nordic Kindergarten Research*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.23865/nbf.v19.233>

Contextual info.:

The article examines the supervisor's understanding of his own practice and discusses peer supervision in a professional learning community in pre-school. This supervisor has guidance expertise and has been given the responsibility of managing colleagues in a group of preschool teachers in the nursery school. The findings indicate that it's important that the supervisor who is leading the PLC has the necessary mandate and clarified expectations within the group in advance, especially since the supervisor is also a colleague of those who participated in the peer supervision. The supervisor has a central role as professional authority, through creating a culture for the development of common understanding and collective theory of practice through processes, relationships and activities. To lead the PLC is experienced as complex and diverse, where the supervisor alternates between different approaches to guidance and maneuvers various balancing acts such as adapting one's own activity, flexible use of structures, both support and challenge and reflecting on guidance on an overall level.

[2] Morud, E. B., & Rokkones, K. (2020). Deling av kunnskap og kompetanse er ingen selvfølge for deltakere i Yrkesfaglærerløftet. *Scandinavian journal for vocational education* (5,1) pp 129–144

Translation of reference:

Morud, E. B., & Rokkones, K. (2020). Sharing knowledge and expertise is not a matter of course for participants in the Vocational Teacher Promotion. *Scandinavian journal for vocational education* (5,1) pp 129–144

Contextual info.:

The article presents how the vocational teachers experience that the research and development skills they acquire through further education contribute to the development of the school's professional learning community. The authors argue that the school's formal leaders must take the main responsibility for developing a learning organization and for each individual teacher to experience themselves as part of a professional learning community. Vocational teachers participating in further education believe that they could have been used more actively to develop the professional learning community in the school than what they experience. The formal leaders must make arrangements so that individual learning that takes place in further education can contribute to the collective learning in the school.

[3] Luthen, G. S., Hollup, K., Bratland, A. K., Korseberg, K. A. N., & Warem, Ø. (2021). Veiledningsmøter som læringsarena for lærerstudenter og nyutdannede lærere. *Norsk pedagogisk tidsskrift*, (5), 467-481.

Translation of reference:

Luthen, G. S., Hollup, K., Bratland, A. K., Korseberg, K. A. N., & Warem, Ø. (2021). Guidance meetings as a learning arena for student teachers and newly qualified teachers. *Norwegian pedagogical journal*, (5), 467-481.

Contextual info.:

The purpose of the article is to explore the effects of four mentoring sessions attended by students from the teacher education programme (PPU), together with newly qualified teachers from two different upper secondary schools and a mentor from each school. This study is a part of a co-operation between a higher-educational institution for teacher education and two teacher education schools. The theoretical aspects of this study are linked to the concepts of the meeting in its existential form, mentoring, and teacher professionalism. Findings show that mentoring sessions have a dual functionality; they can, at the same time, promote security and risk. This dual functionality challenges the mentor to take their practice in the direction of having an open and caring approach. Furthermore, results show that students in training and newly qualified teachers are similar in many aspects. They appear to be more robust than previously assumed, and they acknowledge and learn from each other during mentoring sessions.

[4] Korsager, M., Reitan, B., & Haslekås, C. (2023a). Læreres erfaringer med kompetanseutvikling i et online profesjonelt læringsfelleskap: When teacher professional development in learning communities goes online. *Nordic Studies in Science Education*, 19(1), 49-61.

Translation of reference:

Korsager, M., Reitan, B., & Haslekås, C. (2023a). Teachers' experiences with competence development in an online professional learning community: When teacher professional development in learning communities goes online. *Nordic Studies in Science Education*, 19(1), 49-61.

Contextual info.: The study presents what reflections science teachers express when they shared experiences after trying out a new teaching method in science in an online synchronous professional learning community (PLC), and how they experienced participation in the online PLC. The results indicate that the teachers experienced increased awareness about their own teaching practice. The teachers were comfortable conducting collaborative sessions synchronously online and found that this gave them flexibility in terms of time and their geographical location. However, the support provided by the module was not sufficient to create reflective discussions for all the teachers. This insight is an important contribution, which should be considered to support PLC (online or not) in schools.

[4] Korsager, M., Reitan, B., & Dahl, M. G. (2023b). Kompetanseutvikling i et profesjonelt læringsfelleskap: En studie av læreres samtaler om undervisning for dybdelæring. *Nordina : Nordic Studies in Science Education*, 19(1), 4–19. <https://doi.org/10.5617/nordina.8963>

Translation of reference:

Korsager, Reitan, B., & Dahl, M. G. (2023). Competence development in a professional learning community: A study of teachers' conversations about teaching for deep learning. *Nordina: Nordic Studies in Science Education*, 19(1), 4–19. <https://doi.org/10.5617/nordina.8963>

Contextual info.:

This study followed a group of primary school teachers in a professional learning community at their own school, as they discussed principles of teaching for deep learning while working with a resource for professional development in science education. The purpose of the study has been to explore if and how conducting the resource in their local learning community would contribute to the teachers' professional development in teaching for deep learning. Two teachers are trained to lead the PLC-groups.

[6] Vennebo, K.F., & Aas, M. (2021). Ledelse av profesjonelle gruppediskusjoner. I M. Aas og K.F. Vennebo (red.) *Ledelse av profesjonelle læringsfelleskap i skolen*. (s. 191-210). Fagbokforlaget.

Translation of reference:

Vennebo, K.F., & Aas, M. (2021). Management of professional group discussions. In M. Aas and K.F. Vennebo (ed.) *Management of professional learning communities in schools*. (pp. 191-210). Fagbokforlaget.

Contextual info.: The article has investigated how the group leader in PLCs contribute to discussions and promote learning among the participants in leadership-PLCs, and the group leader is trained to use group coaching in the meetings. The group coaching consists of a presentation of the problem, questioning to clarify the matter, reflection and perspectives related to the problem statement, reflections and answers from the coach, summary and decision-making about the action plan.

[7] Emstad, A.B. (2021). Å utvikle et profesjonelt læringsfelleskap på ledernivå. Et profesjonelt læringsfelleskap i gavnet så vel som i navnet.

Translation of reference:

Emstad, A. (2021). Å utvikle et profesjonelt læringsfelleskap på ledernivå-et profesjonelt læringsfelleskap i gavnet så vel som i navnet. I M. Aas, & KF Vennebo (Red.). *Ledelse av profesjonelle læringsfelleskap i skolen*, pp. 233-253.

Contextual info.: The article is based on three sub studies of three different PLCs for leaders. There are both internal and external facilitators leading the plc meeting, and there are examples. The study investigates which content and which structures promote a PLC in order to get from sharing experiences to learning from experiences by, as the participants develop the ability for deeper reflections in the group.

Academic books/booklets:

[8] Bratseth, E. (2018). Læringsfelleskap. Lastet 21.12.2023 fra <https://www.matematikkenteret.no/sites/default/files/2022-09/L%C3%A6ringsfelleskap.pdf>

Translation of reference:

Bratseth, E. (2018). Learning community. Downloaded 21.12.2023 from <https://www.matematikkenteret.no/sites/default/files/2022-09/L%C3%A6ringsfelleskap.pdf>

Contextual info.: The article looks at how leaders can develop professional learning communities and guide teachers' learning. The author argues that where the principal/formal leaders facilitates the teacher's learning, the teachers can develop a learning community that promotes professional development in the individual teacher.

[9] Qvortrup, L., Nordahl, T. O & Hansen, O.H. (2018). Profesjonelle læringsfelleskap. Gyldendal akademiske forlag.

Translation of reference:

Qvortrup, L., Nordahl, T. and Hansen, O.H. (2018). Professional learning communities. Gyldendal akademiske forlag.

Contextual info.: A booklet about professional learning communities. What it is, why PLCs and how to develop PLCs. The booklet is to make research-based knowledge accessible for schools. One of the chapters is about the role of leaders and the role of the team coordinator. This chapter provide suggestions of how to support the team-leader (the one leading the group/meeting), and the role if the principal in developing the school as a PLC is elaborated.

[10] Knutsen, B.& Emstad, A. B.(2021). *Ledelse for en inkluderende skole: Også for elever med stort læringspotensial*. Fagbokforlaget.

Translation of reference:

Knutsen, B., Emstad, A. B., & Bårdset, T. L. (2021). Management for an inclusive school: also for the gifted and talented. Fagbokforlaget.

Contextual info.: The book provides insight into how leaders can facilitate an inclusive school by building a collective learning culture (a PLC) that focuses on learning for all. Achieving the goal of an inclusive school requires that school leaders and teachers have the necessary skills to identify all students' prerequisites, needs and learning potential, and to assess whether the school is adapted to the students' learning needs.

[11] Emstad, A. B. & Birkeland, I.K. 2020) *Lærende ledelse. Utvikling av profesjonell læringskultur*. Universitetsforlaget.

Translation of reference:

Emstad, A. B. Og Birkeland, I.K. 2020) *Learning leadership, and development of a professional learning culture*. Universitetsforlaget.

Contextual info.: The book provides insight into how leaders can develop a learning culture, and how managers can develop a learning culture, which is explained in the book as a premise for developing a PLC. The book provides a theoretical basis for why and how to build professional learning communities but focuses on inquiry as stance.

1. PLC understanding and setting

Development of professional learning communities in Norway is often linked to the concept of lifelong learning and the understanding of the school as a learning organization. The concept is central to national documents and political objectives today. The core curriculum states that “All school staff must take an active part in the professional learning community to develop the school”. Still, the PLC in these sources is fostered both internal and external. Either as a part of the organization structure in the school or connected to external projects or further education where teachers/leaders are organized in PLC in order to enhance learning.

In the Norwegian studies these three forms and aims of PLC are identified:

1. Teachers are organized in ongoing regular PLC-meetings where teacher /leaders collaborate in order to develop their teaching/leadership professional practice with a common goal of contributing to better learning for students. (Bratseth, E.. 2018; Nordahl, T og Hansen, O.H. ,2016; Knutsen, B. & Emstad, A.B. 2021; Vennebo og AAs , 2021; Emstad, A.B .2021)
2. The teachers are gathered in PLC groups as a part of school development projects. The projects aim to promote pedagogical, or subjects related competence, for example, in-depth learning for the student, an inclusive practice, or improve teaching in specific subjects like math, science, etc., developed by/or together with external partners. The ultimate goal is to enhance student learning (Luthen, G. S., et al; Fimreite, 2022).
3. Teachers or leaders are organized in PLC groups as participants in further education, the aim is to increase the benefit from the education through collective work with tasks related to the education (Morud, E.B. & Rokkones, K.L., 2020; Korsager, M. et al, 2023a; Korsager et al. 2023b)

The PLC-participants are schoolteachers, pre-school teachers, school leaders, supervisors and university teachers. Most of the PLC-s are mandatory, just av few are voluntary.

2. View on inquiry & reflection

Inquiry

Whether the Norwegian studies are linked to teachers’ continuing education or school development, they are all linked to inquiry. 1) Inquire into today’s practice by using evidence-based knowledge about the student’s needs and 2) inquire into the results of new practices. Inquiry is often related to R&D work, that is, the participants plan practice changes after inquiring into their own practice, and then plan, implement, and evaluate. This refers to trying out new measures in their teaching and then participating in collective reflection on the results afterwards, also based on data. In short – in the studies its emphasized that teachers must work with learning objectives that they themselves have helped to select; the learning objectives must be based on their own development needs (Bratseth, 2018; Korsager, 2023a; Nordahl & Hansen, 2016). There is an expectation that collaboration in PLC should result in deep learning, i.e., learning based on concrete examples, student data, knowledge/theory, and observations and reflections around the student’s learning, well-being, and development (Qvortrup,

Nordahl & Hansen, 2018). It can be experienced as a balancing act related to the degree of activity and structure, as well as challenging, supporting and continuously assessing situations and relationships (Fimreite, 2022). If the participants lack the communication skills to challenge and inquire practice, the PLC will struggle to achieve their goals (Emstad, 2020; Fimreite, 2022).

Reflection

Reflection is linked both to conversations related to principles and tools (familiarizing oneself with literature) for teaching (e.g., principles related to in-depth learning), and to analyzing teaching activities that teachers try out as part of further education.

In some of the reviewed literature the reflection is based on video of teaching, observation of teaching, observations or recording of conversations. In the PLC the participants are sharing experiences and then joining collective reflection.

In some of the studies, it emerges that some PLCs struggle to make progress in learning and development, because they are unable to promote critical reflection. They struggle to critically reflect and think in teams, rather than unilaterally exchanging experiences (Emstad, 2021; Vennebo & Aas, 2021). In further education content of modules and structure guided the teachers' conversations and contributed that the professional learning community didn't becoming a place of unstructured conversations, simple exchange of ideas, or helping to reinforce established attitudes and habits rather than developing practice. Still, the module wasn't enough to promote critical reflection and constructive conversations (Korsager et al, 2023a).

The leader's role is to develop a safe climate in the group, something that makes it easier to challenge. Challenging is a prerequisite for critical reflection. Across the Norwegian studies, it emerges a challenge for developing PLCs, is the absence of analysis, one-sided reflection and predominance of personal experiences and subjective claims challenge peer guidance in a group as a professional learning community, which can hinder creative and innovative perspectives that generate change and development (Emstad, 2021; Knutsen & Emstad, 2021; Korsager et al, 2023ab; Nordal, 2016; Nordahl, T & Hansen, 2016; Vennebo og Aas, 2021). Challenging culture and practice prove to be valuable if peer guidance in a group is to function as a professional learning community, but if they are to manage this, they need support (Korsager, 2023b; Vennebo og Aas, 2021). The literature stresses the skills on how to question assumptions, checking the validity of assumptions, using data to assess the relationship between teaching and learning, examining and exploring one's own practice, looking inwards - using evidence to assess whether teaching leads to all pupils learning and developing (Knutsen & Emstad, 2021; Nordal, 2016; Nordahl, T & Hansen, 2016; Vennebo og Aas, 2021).

3. General support for PLCs and differentiation of helping roles

There are different kind of support depending on what kind of a PLC the studies have investigated:

- a. Regular PLC-meetings for teacher/ leaders
- b. PLC groups as a part of school development projects.
- c. PLC groups for participants in further education

Regular PLC-meetings for teacher/ leaders, and PLC groups as a part of internal school development projects (a/b).

At school level, the studies show that the principals provide for this kind of PLC-meetings, whether it concerns setting aside time, following up or contributing to the training/appointment of leaders for the PLC groups (Knutsen & Emstad, 2021; Bratseth, 2018; Morud & Rokkones, 2020; Nordahl, 2016). The studies are also concerned with how principals make the connection between the work and learning in the PLC-groups, and the school as an organization.

In the Norwegian most of the studies there is one person chosen to lead these PLC-meetings. There is great variation in the use of terms, regardless of whether there are external or only internal persons involved. Terms used are supervisor, team-coordinator, (group)-leader, mentor and facilitator.

PLC groups as a part of external school development projects (b), and PLC groups for participants in further education (c)

In the studies concerning further education, the PLCs are supported by external teaching staff from university/university colleges. These studies are describing external resources and resource people who facilitate the arrangements, but individual teachers are selected to lead the PLC work itself. The participating teachers are put into groups that follow prepared and planned activities that are intended to promote reflection and inquiry, preferably based on data collected from their own developed, testing and (data-)based evaluation of teaching plans.

Where teachers in the school participate in external PLC as part of further education, it is a challenge to the competence they are not allowed to bring into the learning community at their own school after participation in the further education. The study points out that the school management must facilitate that this competence is also brought into the collective learning in school (Morud & Rokkones, 2020) This can only happen if the group leaders ask for this type of competence.

4. Difficulties helping roles face and solutions reported by experience and data

All studies point to formal leaders/principals have a responsibility to facilitate PLC and professional learning. Furthermore, individual learning is a step on the way to collective learning (Morud & Rokkones, 2022; Knutsen and Emstad, 2021).

Independent of a, b and c, most of the studies are concerned about the role of the person who leads the PLC-meetings/groups (supervisor, team-coordinator, (group)-leader, mentor and facilitator), and how they lead the meeting. The second is the importance of critical reflection, which is also linked to the role of the person leading the group. That is, how the leader allows the group to explore and be challenged individually when they reflect on practice. A challenging culture and practice proves to be valuable if the guidance in a group is to function as a professional learning community, but being both a professional authority and a colleague challenges the team-coordinators role (Qvortrup et al, 2018). Still the group climate must create a psychological security for the PLC-meetings to lead to an experience of learning.

In some studies, the group leaders have received training (Emstad, 2021; Vennebo & Aas, 2021), in others they are only appointed to lead the groups without training. They may be trained in structures and frameworks, but not how they can contribute to critical reflection, inquiry and deeper learning (Korsager et al 2023 a,b). In other studies its emphasized that the leader of the PLC-groups has authority, but this requires a clear mandate from the formal leaders in the school, in addition to legitimacy in the group. In several of the studies there is an expectation that the leader will lead and facilitate learning, through having skills that ensure critical reflection and inquiry. The interplay between the leader of the group and the participants is a driving force, but when the leader of the PLC-meeting is internal, being colleagues can disrupt the collective learning process. In those PLCs, where one strives to achieve reflexive thinking and deepen learning, the studies point to the fact that the leader lacks this skill, and thus the PLC does not get a good enough quality in their reflections and discussions. Challenges are often associated with being a clear leader of the process and at the same time facilitating a free discussion.

In Qvortrup et al. (2018) booklet it says that the leaders in the school leaders must educate team-coordinator and give them space to lead, in order to both foster learning and reflection, and on the other side leaves its mark in practice. The team-coordinator must learn about how to prepare the meetings, take responsibility for data, ensure goals are set and achieved, be a link between the management and

the team. Do this by providing an agenda, starting on time, clarifying what the meeting is about, making sure to tighten up the discussions that are about to derail. Furthermore, ensure that "everyone must be involved, but effectively". Emstad and Birkeland (2020) suggest practicing skills based on Robinsons theories (2020) on how to contribute to reflection, in a way that take care of relations and at the same time be on task (solve problems). The facilitator must be both a driving force and challenger, by promote data-use in order to evaluate and develop practice.

5. Conclusions for PLC leadership and facilitation from an inquiry-based and reflective perspective

According to international literature the main challenge with PLC is the level of reflection and inquiry when the PLC-member have dialogues and discussions. The PLC`s are having problems getting from storytelling to critical reflection. Collaboration and collegiality that only relate to how questions seem to contribute more to the status quo than to change and improvement (Qvortrup, 2018). Systematics, smaller groups and a permanent facilitator/group coordinator can provide a good framework for professional learning communities. One of the solutions suggested in the reviewed literature is to train the person who lead the PLC-group/meetings, in communication skills, and focus on how the participant can be supported in order to learn how to inquire and challenging each other's practice (Emstad & Birkeland, 2020; Fimreite, 2022; Knutsen & Emstad, 2021; Qvortrup et al., 2018). Qvortrup et al., (2018) concludes that educating team-coordinator can help the PLC to reach their goals for student learning. A group-coordinator must develop norms for communication and interaction where one dares to challenge, if one has not developed this type of culture, then this can be an obstacle to professional learning (Emstad & Birkeland, 2020; Knutsen & Emstad, 2021; Qvortrup et al., 2018; Vennebo & Aas, 2021).

Another suggestion is to use structures, but to use them flexible as a fixed structure can prevent spontaneous reflection and reduces the leader to a communication expert (Fimreite, 2022). The structures can mean that there is a fixed structure at the meeting that the team-coordinator/facilitator is following, with different phases or tasks to be covered, and often the structures are there to ensure that everyone is involved. Some also have different modules that provide a fixed structure for the meetings, where there is a review of theory, planning before testing, and then reflection afterwards. As for instance designed modules with both theory and practical tasks and activities can be a helping tool (Korsager et al, 2023ab). Still, Emstad (2020) in her study of different PLCs, with and without fixed structures, conclude that structures are not the decisive factor for the success of the PLCs, it is the ability to inquire and reflect on a deeper level. According to other international literature, one of the most important roles of the facilitator/group-coordinator is to create norms for interaction and collaboration (Margalef & Roblin, 2016).

Authors

Bård Knutsen is head of the University School Collaboration in Trondheim, and associate professor in biology didactics at the Department of Teacher Education, NTNU. He has extensive experience from primary schools, both as a teacher and principal. Knutsen has been employed at NTNU since 2007, and his research interessts is adapted education for pupils with great learning potential and newly qualified teachers' use of alternative learning arenas, beside school development, professional learning communities.

Anne Berit Emstad is professor of school management and innovation leader at the Department of Teacher Education, NTNU. She has extensive experience from the field of education in the municipal sector, but since 2008 has taught and researched in the field of leadership development, school development, cultural school and teacher training at NTNU. She has published articles and books both nationally and internationally, and in recent years her research interest has been particularly focused on the development of professional learning communities at leadership level.