



**Literature Review on
Leading and Facilitating
Professional Learning Communities
in Spain and Spanish-speaking
countries**



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Introduction

The following document reports on bibliographic sources where the topic of facilitation/leadership of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), communities of practice, teacher teams, etc. is addressed in studies that took place in Spain and in Spanish-speaking Latin-American countries. Two databases (Web of Sciences and Scopus) and the search engine Google Scholar were used to search for relevant literature. The fact that less than seven studies were found with a central or peripheral focus on this topic led us to extend the search to Spanish-speaking sources. Of the eight sources included, seven are articles published in academic journals or in conference proceedings. This report also includes a handbook aimed to provide a clear guideline as to how to establish and sustain headteachers PLCs published by a state agency (Ministerio de Educación de Ecuador).

The following sources have been used for the report. Six of the sources explicitly address PLCs (Flores-Fahara et al., 2021; Krichesky, 2017; Luna Cortés & Cano Ruiz, 2018; Margalef & Roblin, 2016; Mellado Hernández, et al., 2020; Ministerio de Educación, 2021); one refers to “communities of practice” (Barrero Fernández et al., 2020) and another, to “learning communities” (Margalef García, 2011).

Together with the source, some basic contextual information has been provided to facilitate the understanding of the situation within which the study or the document (in the case of the above-mentioned handbook) was conducted.

Academic articles

Barrero Fernández, B., Domingo Segovia, J., & Fernández Gálvez, J. D. (2020). Liderazgo intermedio y desarrollo de comunidades de práctica profesional: Lecciones emergentes de un estudio de caso. *Psicoperspectivas*, 19(1), 1-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol19-issue1-fulltext-1751>

Contextual information: This case study “aimed to analyse the actions of a regional advisor as a middle leader for the development of professional practice communities within their area. The purpose of the case study was to determine the general view of this action model from the perspective of their interlocutors (teachers, school leaders, families and supervisor) and to draw comprehensive lessons from this knowledge.” (p. 1). It is claimed that the school system has support services that can assume the role of critical colleagues and intermediate leaders. It is also mentioned that the inspectorate and support services could also act as intermediate leaders. The study explores the work of an advisor to four schools in a low socio-economic and cultural area. The advisor decides to get involved in and facilitate the professional development of teachers and carries out activities aimed at creating learning communities or “networks of collegiality or learning communities”.

Flores-Fahara, M.; Bailey-Moreno, J. Y Torres-Arcadia, C.C. (2021). Liderazgo docente en comunidades profesionales de aprendizaje: Estudio de caso de dos escuelas públicas en México. *Revista Electrónica Educare*, 25(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.15359/ree.25-1.4>

Contextual information: This study analyses the formation process of two PLCs made up of teachers and headteachers of public primary schools in the city of Monterrey, in Mexico with the objective of promoting school improvement processes through the organisational model. The differences and similarities of each of them are analysed in terms of size, social composition, people participating in the PLCs and the role played by the headteachers leaders. The research team participated as facilitators of the PLCs.

Krichesky, G. J. (2017). El desafío de Liderar Comunidades Profesionales de Aprendizaje. Un estudio de casos sobre dirección escolar. In F. J. Murillo, *Avances en Liderazgo y Mejora de la*

Educación. Actas del I Congreso Internacional de Liderazgo y Mejora de la Educación (pp. 33-36). Red de Investigación sobre Liderazgo y Mejora de la Educación – RILME

Contextual information: The objective of this research study (case study) involved identifying, describing and understanding leadership practices linked to the development of PLCs in two schools in Madrid where collaborative learning is promoted through experimentation and collective reflection. The study aimed at answering the following research questions:

- What leadership practices encourage collaboration among colleagues?
- How do headteachers promote collective learning among teachers?
- What impact does a headteacher have on the resulting collaborative learning modalities?

Luna Cortés, G., & Cano Ruiz, A. (2018). Innovar desde la telesecundaria a través de la conformación de comunidades profesionales de aprendizaje. *Innovación educativa*, 18(77), 165-181.

Contextual information: A group of teachers of ‘telesecundaria’, a modality of instruction that combines distance and presence teaching, located in the state of Veracruz in Mexico, aimed to innovate in their daily practices with the leadership of their headteacher, who took over the role of pedagogical leader. An innovation project was designed by the headteacher that addressed the school challenges. Consequently, the teachers' difficulties were assumed as starting points. The objective of this innovation project was to set up a PLC among the teaching staff, assisted by collaborative consultancies with the purpose of developing reflective skills and improving teaching practices.

Margalef García, L. (2011). Encouraging Teachers’ and Students’ Innovation with the Support of Teacher Learning Communities. *CEP Journal* 1(1), 133-152

Contextual information: This case study presents the preliminary results of six “Teaching Innovation Teams”, that is, learning communities that were created at the University of Alcalá (Spain) with the aim of promoting the implementation of curricular innovation processes through collaborative learning processes. A case study comprised of six Teaching Innovation Teams was conducted and the factors and limitations of the learning communities for professional development and innovation were analysed. Four of the six groups consisted of teachers from the same disciplinary area: two from the health sciences, one the from social sciences and one from engineering. Two further interdisciplinary groups consisted of teachers from different disciplinary areas.

The research questions were the following:

- What stages or phases do the Innovation Teams go through?
- What factors favour the team’s involvement in the innovation?
- What is the facilitator’s role? What strategies are used to encourage reflection by the team and foster their development?
- What are the relationships established amongst the team members and between the team and the facilitator?

Margalef, L., & Pareja Roblin, N. (2016). Unpacking the roles of the facilitator in higher education professional learning communities. *Educational Research and*

***Evaluation*, 22(3-4), 155-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2016.1247722>**

Contextual information: The study reported here (a multiple case study approach [4 cases] took place within the context of a teacher development programme running at a public university in Spain since 2006. A key feature of this programme was the establishment of PLCs across the university with the ultimate goals of (a) facilitating teacher learning and (b) improving the quality of teaching through the collaborative design and implementation of innovative teaching strategies. The current study was set out to answer the following research questions:

- What roles and tasks do facilitators adopt throughout the development of the PLCs?
- What strategies do facilitators use to support teacher learning in the PLCs?
- What challenges do facilitators confront in their work with the PLCs

Mellado Hernández, M.E., Rincón-Gallardo, S., Aravena Kenigs, O.A., & Villagra Bravo, M.P. (2020). Acompañamiento a redes de líderes escolares para su transformación en comunidades profesionales de aprendizaje. *Perfiles Educativos*, XLII(169), 52-69. <https://doi.org/10.22201/iisue.24486167e.2020.169.59363>

Contextual information: This multiple-case study describes the support strategy to ten networks of school leaders ($N = 139$) in Chile, and its impact on the development of their school management skills, leadership practices, and culture of learning. These leaders were supported by “critical friends” from an Educational Leadership Center for two and a half years. The research questions are:

- What effects does the accompaniment of a “critical friend” have on the development of capacities, practices and culture of collaboration in networks of school leaders?
- What conditions must be ensured to promote online learning? And
- How can an external advisor foster network learning?

Handbook

Ministerio de Educación. (2021). *Manual para crear y acompañar Comunidades Profesionales de Aprendizaje (CPA) de equipos directivos*. Ministerio de Educación. República del Educador.

Contextual information: This handbook is aimed at the educational advisory staff (EAS) (facilitators) and the school management teams (headteachers) (leaders) who participate in a PLC. The emphasis on the EAS lies in their key role in the promotion, creation, and support of headteacher PLCs. Once the PLC has been formed, this handbook is mainly oriented to the person in charge of the internal coordination, chosen by the PLC members, who will lead and maintain the continuity of the PLC while the EAS continues to accompany, but remotely.

1. PLC understanding and setting

The PLCs/communities in these sources are fostered by external agencies or staff (research teams at the ministry of education of the Mexican government, university services or offices, and at a ministry of education, and an educational advisor from the local educational authority), or by the school headteachers. The promotion of these learning communities has the aims of

- (a) facilitating teacher or headteacher (school leaders, management team) professional development;

- (b) enhancing the quality of teaching by collaboratively designing and implementing innovative teaching strategies, by engaging in collective reflection, or by focusing on improving school leaders' management competences and leadership; and
- (c) identifying problems at school and propose solutions.

Studies concerned with PLCs, rather than justifying why PLCs are perceived an appropriate way to achieve these aims, refer to the benefits reported by studies in which teachers or school leaders participate in PLCs. For example, Flores-Fahara et al. (2021) write: "Among the alternatives to promote collective work, as well as participation and teacher leadership, PLCs are considered promising and valuable for school management as meetings occur between teachers motivated to learn, share and disseminate knowledge resulting from their experience and tacit knowledge, as well as the opportunity to establish reflective dialogues" (p. 5). Additionally, these authors characterize the collaboration within PLCs as based on what Louis and Kruse (1995) label as reflective dialogue, in which teachers hold conversations and identify problems about students, teaching and learning.

The PLC/learning communities/community of practice participants are schoolteachers, school leaders/headteachers, and university teachers. In the cases where this issue was mentioned, participation in PLCs/communities is voluntary.

Some studies and the handbook refer to the role, practices, experiences, etc. of the external facilitator of the community (Barrero Fernández et al., 2020; Margalef García, 2011; Margalef & Pareja Roblin, 2016; Mellado Hernández, et al., 2020; Ministerio de Educación, 2021). The following studies and the handbook explore the roles, practices, experiences, etc. of internal leaders in the PLCs: Flores-Fahara et al., 2021; Krichesky, 2017; Luna Cortés & Cano Ruiz, 2018; Mellado Hernández, et al., 2020; Ministerio de Educación, 2021.

2. View on inquiry and reflection

The sources reviewed take a variety of stances in terms of how explicitly they address the notions of reflection and inquiry. In general, reflection:

- is used to characterise the aim of the professional development initiative (PLCs are recognized as groups of teachers that reflect on their practice and as an opportunity to participate in reflective dialogues);
- is seen as a competence needed to generate and apply knowledge to new or problematic situations as discussed by Schön (1983);
- is acknowledged to stem from the systematic analysis of practice and to be oriented towards practice in Schön's (1998) sense; and
- is considered as a way of promoting innovation (innovation through learning communities is seen to contribute to the development of abilities for reflection on the professional tasks). Margalef (2011) addresses the institutional drive to establish 'teaching innovation teams' as being rooted in "research conducted by the teachers themselves as a way of ensuring a change in the traditional habitus and the search for a reflective habitus that leads to innovation from "within" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003; Lieberman, 2003; Ponte, 2002)" (p. 137).

Some studies fail to provide their understanding of reflection and/or inquiry (and in some studies no mention to the notion of inquiry is made). For example, Margalef and Pareja Roblin (2016) fail to provide their understanding of reflection, although they mention reflective professional inquiry, or "the opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective dialogue and to share and generate knowledge through interaction" (p. 157) as one of the six key features of PLCs identified by Stoll et al. (2006). They also identify stimulating reflection as one of the roles of facilitators in their study. In their study, the term

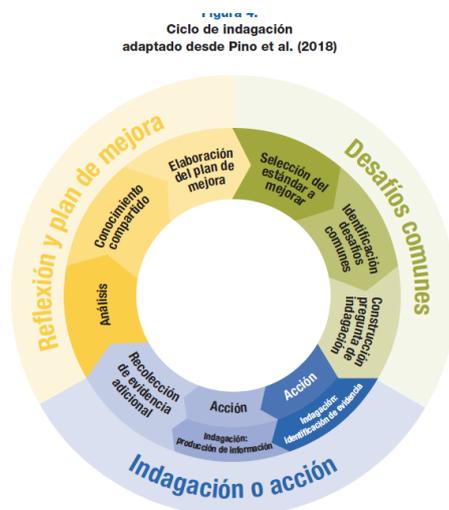
inquiry is only used when referring to the literature on PLCs and facilitators, and when reporting findings, but no definition or model of inquiry is mentioned.

The most detailed and comprehensive account of how reflection and inquiry are built into their PLC model is that laid out in the handbook by the Ministerio de Educación of Ecuador. It adopts the following view of inquiry, citing Pino et al. (2018):

Collaborative inquiry is a type of collective and participatory research focused on the professional practices of teachers and headteachers, whose purpose is to understand and improve teaching and learning processes. Collaborative inquiry, as a methodology, offers important advantages when it comes to promoting the articulation of collaboration and network learning, as dialogue that mobilizes people's convictions must be promoted so as to improve and innovate teaching-learning processes. These dialogues must be translated into concrete actions, which go from school networks to classrooms and vice versa, so that these actions serve as the basis of reflective processes with a pedagogical orientation, with a focus on teaching and learning processes. This means moving from an individual improvement to a systemic improvement. (p. 20)

The handbook adopts Pino et al.'s (2018) cycle of enquiry that encompasses three phases:

- Phase 1. Common challenges
- Phase 2. Inquiry or action
- Phase 3. Reflection and improvement plan



Fuente: Pino et al. (2018)

(Source: Ministerio de Educación, 2021, p. 30)

Reflection comes in in the first and the third phases. The first one includes the formulation of one or more inquiry questions. These questions are examined within the PLC, and then refined to align with the specific needs so that they face a common challenge. The inquiry questions serve as focal points for investigation, involving research in specialized publications, engagement with community educational stakeholders, or a reflective process before initiating any improvement/action plans. The third and last phase consists of reflecting on the data of the investigation or about the results and effects of the implementation of the action. Through the exchange of experiences and reflections, new knowledge is generated. The phase concludes with an improvement plan. Inquiry and reflection thus provide the necessary inputs to effect changes at the school.

Regarding how reflection was fostered, the studies reflect a variety of agents, strategies and tools:

- through questions (posed by facilitators) that served two complementary purposes: (a) challenge teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices and (b) help the members of the PLCs to consider other alternatives;
- using video recorded lessons to get the PLC members to discuss what had happened in lessons and the strategies used by the teachers with the help of an observation guide;
- through collective student data analysis (with the aim to promote empirical reflection on practice); and,
- through the contributions of facilitators who a) helped to identify the problem the community wanted to understand and solve, b) provided academic texts that facilitate reflection.

3. General support for PLCs and differentiation of helping roles

PLCs/communities are most frequently helped by external facilitators who are provided by educational authorities or university bodies, including research teams. When external facilitators are not present, it is the headteacher who acts as a pedagogical leader and promotes PLCs from within the institution.

The term facilitator is used in the sources written in English while 'asesor' (usually translated as 'advisor') is used to name the external staff that initiates and/or supports the PLC in Spanish. The term "critical friend" or "critical colleague" is also used to refer to the external support staff. Director (headteacher)/ directivos (management teams)/líder escolar (school leader) are the terms used to refer to the internal staff who promotes PLCs.

Concerning PLC support/facilitation, these sources are cited: Avgitidou, 2009; Berry & Russell, 2014; Carlson et al., 2018; Gurr & Huerta, 2013; Huerta, 2014 Loughran & Brubaker 2015; Martin & Russell, 2018; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Ponte et al., 2002; Schuck & Russell, 2016; Yin & Zheng, 2018.

Margalef (2011) support her view of facilitation citing Ponte et al. (2002, p. 419), who highlights five characteristics of the facilitation process:

- *Cyclic*, making teachers constantly look back (What have I done?) and forward (How can I progress from here?)
- *Explicit*, clarifying what the teachers were doing and expressing it in action research terms
- *Negotiated*, convincing the teachers, based on arguments, of the best way to proceed in the given circumstances
- *Forceful*, continuously talking with the teachers about the actual carrying out of certain activities, as well as discussing these activities with colleagues in a systematic and purposeful manner
- *Critical*, asking the teachers about what they are doing and why.

3.1. The external helping role (i.e., the facilitator)

The role of facilitator in the sources selected is assumed by staff working at the university office responsible for the teachers' professional development in terms of pedagogical skills, an advisor working for the educational authority, and members of research groups at a university and at an school authority.

The aims and the roles of the facilitators are not addressed separately in these sources and the discussion revolves mainly around the the roles/functions they adopt concerning the PLC support.

The main roles assumed by the external 'facilitator' or support staff are the following:

- coordinate teachers' collective work;
- create a suitable environment to support professional development;
- strengthen the ability and motivation of the group to generate knowledge about their own teaching practice;
- investigate the beliefs and assumptions of the community members to make them explicit and generate cognitive conflicts;
- offer timely feedback and provide “another perspective” on leadership practices;
- help to identify the problem the community wanted to understand and solve,
- establish strong professional ties with its members;
- provide access to relevant resources and academic texts; and
- create opportunities for reflection and for establishing close connections to teachers' daily work.

Specifically in relation to the Spanish school system, where headteachers have no responsibility over teachers' contracts, wages, etc., the facilitator in one study is welcome by headteachers as curricular advisor as they recognized that they did not have the “necessary technical knowledge or are lacking that role of authority that allows them to “force” their teachers to assume certain proposals” (Barrero Fernández et al., 2020, p. 8).

The only source that includes detailed information concerning facilitators' roles and competences by far is the handbook by the Ministerio de Educación of Ecuador. It establishes a first phase in supporting PLCs at schools in which headteachers/school leaders are introduced into the tenets and practices of PLCs so as to prepare them to promote teacher PLC collaboration later on at their respective schools. This handbook establishes clear competences for the facilitator, materials, protocols and rationale, and a detailed guideline on how to foster PLCs. No other source mentions the competences needed by a facilitator.

No information is provided on the specific training staff needs to become facilitators and if they ever received some specific training for this function. One source (Mellado Hernández et al., 2020) reports that PLCs were more likely to succeed when they focused their work on pedagogical issues and manage to develop democratic and challenging learning environments, with strong principles of trust and mutual respect for learning. However, the success or failure of the PLCs is not attributed to the facilitator, but to the PLC network itself.

3.2. The internal helping role (i.e., the leader)

The internal school leaders in the sources selected were invariably the school headteachers. They assume similar roles to those assumed by facilitators when they promote PLCs but also other roles that seem to be more directly linked to the school challenges and its idiosyncrasy, and to the affordances for professional development within the school system. These roles are the following:

- foster reflection on teaching practices;
- promote collaboration among school teaching staff and encourage teachers to make pedagogical decisions together;
- provide texts or other materials relevant to the discussion and reflection;
- stimulate innovation in teaching practices;
- promote collective analysis of learning results to effect changes based on them;

- provide support and help to teachers in collective problem solving;
- promote professional development at the school by selecting topics linked to Institutional initiatives;
- increase the time and spaces for teachers’ meetings;
- encourage teachers to participate in development activities oriented to student learning and topics of interest to the school areas in need of improvement;
- support and encourage teachers to assume leadership in school projects and innovative initiatives; and
- promote teacher teams where teachers meet and develop under the tutelage of more experienced colleagues.

No information is provided on their training in PLC development or on any other aspects of their function.

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

The following challenges are reported by the selected sources:

- limited time; it is acknowledged that engaging in collaborative development requires time to get together as a group and to reflect. However, competing priorities severely limit the opportunities facilitators have to meet with the group and support their learning;
- being seen or act as experts by the PLC members;
- provide ‘ready-made’ formulas and solution to problems; rather than doing that, the facilitator must foster understanding about the problems and their possible alternatives through the community members’ own involvement and reflection;
- keeping a critical stance towards the PLC work whilst maintaining a close bond with its members; it is recognized that, as time goes by, it is possible that facilitators begin to lose the “outsider” perspective that allows them to bring critical insights to the group; and,
- the limited value that PLC members attributed to theoretical input, as opposed to practical experiences.

5. Helping roles and their connection and contribution within the school setting

In the study by Flores-Fahara et al. (2021) casts doubts on the need for facilitators for the success of the PLC: “...it is observed that, although effective school leadership in school improvement is indicated in the bibliography as a success factor (Gurr and Day, 2014), from the documentation of these cases it can be concluded that, although ideal, it turns out not to be essential. To the extent that teaching groups find valuable support in the collaboration space to solve problems, the PLC has the opportunity to legitimize itself as part of the school structures” (p. 17). Mellado Hernández et al. (2020) refers to the need to achieve “stable changes in the ways of thinking and doing in organizations” which implies that educational organizations build relationships of trust and collaborate effectively to achieve common improvement objectives. This study acknowledges having focused on student learning as a factor responsible for the success of the PLC. However, Luna Cano et al (2018) acknowledges that the three months that the reported project involving PLCs lasted was not long enough to effect changes in student learning: “As can be seen, it was complex to identify the impact of the project in student learning. This

goal was ambitious, since it is recognized that more is required time and sustained effort on the part of the teaching community to achieve it” (p. 178).

6. Further aspects the papers inform about

6.1. Strategies used by the facilitators (Margalef, 2011; Margalef & Pareja Roblin, 2016)

Group work strategies: Strategies intended to facilitate group work and group dynamics, and thereby create the necessary conditions for teacher learning.

Knowledge-building strategies: They intended to further develop teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and support practice improvement. A recurrent strategy in this respect consisted of providing targeted training and/or access to relevant literature and exemplary curriculum materials. Such resources were intended to help teachers advance their thinking and improve their practice.

Reflection strategies: Strategies related to the creation of opportunities for individual and collective reflection. The facilitators accomplished this primarily by means of asking questions that served two complementary purposes: (a) challenge teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and practices and (b) help the members of the PLCs to consider other alternatives.

For those groups that are still at the novice level, and even the intermediate level, the facilitator performs functions more related to group coordination and organization: identifying the issues that the group will be working on, encouraging the sharing of knowledge and advising on the planning of actions.

Nonetheless, the role of the facilitator in groups that are at an advanced level changes and becomes more focused on tasks related to creating learning contexts that are:

- focused on knowledge: on problems and practices that make it possible to deepen their conceptual knowledge and skills in a content domain;
- focused on the community: involving the members of the community in collaborative work that is based on the knowledge of each person and on the building of new understandings and practices;
- oriented towards improving their teaching practices: and,
- using a variety of new strategies and tools in their practice.

6.2. Characteristic of effective school leaders (headteachers) (Krichesky, 2017)

- **Trustworthy leadership:** Both headteachers in the study by Krichesky (2017) are acknowledged to inspire trust and, at the same time, they trust their teachers. This generates a virtuous circle of high expectations, support, and mutual help. They build a climate of trust that encourages teachers to deprivatize their practice, implement innovative strategies, and lead projects.
- **Exemplary leadership:** Both headteachers model the school culture they want to promote through being themselves an example of behaviors, attitudes, and verbalizations that illustrate the values and the actions they want to foster.
- **Sustainable leadership:** The needs of the school are prioritized within the parameters of what is possible so that improvement projects are viable and promote the well-being of the participants.

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

The following conclusions can be drawn from the studied reviewed:

- Reported experiences in the literature focus on PLC facilitators, rather than on PLC leaders, most probably because external support staff from university, research and/or ministerial bodies have the conditions and competences to publish in academic journals and books.
- As to the roles assumed by facilitators and leaders the literature report that most of the roles can be assumed by facilitators and leaders. Leaders, however, seem to be more focused on their specific school areas of improvement seem to be particularly able to connect PLC collaboration towards teachers' concerns and institutional demands.
- Except for the handbook, which includes a clear explanation of the interrelation between reflection and inquiry within PLC collaboration and provides a rationale delineating how reflection and inquiry contribute to the establishment and success of PLCs, the remaining sources refrain from addressing either their conceptualization of reflection or the presence and function of inquiry within PLC collaboration and reflection.

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