Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP
Focus group report on learning communities/PLC leaders and PLC-leaders practice and needs

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LeaFaP
Leading and Facilitating Professional Learning Communities
in Schools towards an Inquiry-based and Reflective Practice
KA220-SCH - Cooperation partnerships in school education

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Leading and Facilitating Professional Learning Communities in Schools towards an Inquiry-based and Reflective Practice

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Content

1 Focus group interview 1

Introduction

One focus-interview was conducted - the group was composed of a professional group consisting of two employees at a higher education institution, and a practitioner (school leader) who is also affiliated with the same institution. The informants started working as PLC group leaders in 2017. As researchers, some had longer experience of similar work, without it being referred to as professional learning communities. The informants have led/are leading PLC groups at all levels of the 'school owner value chain', from school owners and school leaders to teachers and student teachers. The three respondents had experience of both online PLC meetings and on-site meetings, and the PLC groups they led also had different meeting intervals, from once a month to twice a semester.

Experiences as PLC group leaders

The motivation for working with PLC has been to contribute to school development and at the same time research the process. Expectations of their own role as PLC group leaders are about contributing to the learning of participants in PLC groups by increasing the quality of reflections, challenging and supporting participants, modeling and articulating what they do, and providing professional input and reminders. By promoting inquiry and data-driven practice, the ultimate goal is to promote increased student learning.

The informants support the learning of the PLC/group members by asking for learning points, what they can draw from what they have done well or not well, and what they should do next. They also have some "time-outs" along the way to have a meta-conversation about how the communication is going. They also have different roles as leader, mentors or peer, depending on who they are leading, and this also affects how they support the learning. They adjust their leadership style according to the maturity level of the groups (experience with PLC work).

The informants evaluate the impact of their role as PLC group leaders thorough notes, observation of the development in the meetings, summarizing at the end of the meetings, action plans and reflection notes from the participants, and through the leaders discussing with each other before and after the meetings. They have varying degrees of responsibility and opportunity to check out how the participants work in the school, depending on whether they are the participants' formal leaders or not (relationship and position).

As group leaders, the informants have an expectation that the participants are interested in developing themselves as leaders and are therefore open to learning by exploring and challenging their own practice. This also includes professional updating, for example by reading professional articles. The managers expect participants to actively participate in the reflections in the meetings, and to work on their action plans and show progress between them. The knowledge base and models ensure communication, critical reflection, and collaboration in the process.

Perceived challenges

In practical terms, it is perceived as challenging for the leader to keep an overview, especially since the leader is often alone in managing the discussion, being a genuine listener and at the same time having to document to follow the process of the individual participant. This is particularly prominent when the groups have many participants.

The role/position and relationship with the members of the PLC groups can be a challenge in relation to open dialogue. Whether one is an equal or a formal leader can make it difficult to follow up and evaluate the progress of the participants, as one is unsure whether the participants are able to be completely truthful or want to "please" their leader. Similarly, mixed groups of leaders and teachers can be a challenge. It can also be perceived as a challenge that the leader knows the context too well and is unable to look up and see the situation as an outside PLC-leaders can.

PLC -leaders find it challenging to decide which questions to ask and when to be clear and when to be more reserved, which means adapting the modeling and feedback to the group's maturity level. It can also be a challenge in cases where participants have not fully understood the why and how of the PLC work, or if they do not show progress in their work.

PLC -leaders promote inquiry and reflection in PLC meetings through the use of tools and a common knowledge base. Evidence of results achieved is requested. To uncover learning points, the leaders go in-depth to explore theories of action. Modeling and professional input are other tools used in the process.

Democratic engagement is not perceived as a major challenge, but as mentioned, the role/position and relationship between leader and group, or between group members, can be an issue.

The PLC-leaders feel that the groups need help to become familiar with the way of working in a PLC. In particular, they mention being careful and clear, for example in relation to the use of terms, or documenting progress through data evidence. Some need help to find realistic actions/areas for improvement, which is part of the leadership tasks, but at the same time a good starting point for learning.

Specific competencies and/or personality traits of a 'good' group leader

The PLC-leader must of course have in-depth knowledge of the knowledge base, models and routines for PLC work. Contextual understanding, in the form of good knowledge of the school system, is highlighted as a prerequisite for the role of PLC-leaders. The leader should have professional confidence and the ability to build confidence in others, including by giving of themselves. A PLC-leader must be genuinely curious, reflect on their own practice and see themselves as a learning leader.

The PLC-leader must also have sufficient simultaneous capacity to lead and listen at the same time, to assess the dialogue, and in parallel take notes as a basis for identifying learning points, monitoring progress and being able to provide individual feedback that is adapted to the maturity level of groups or individuals.

Need for support/training

As this is a group that researches practice and provides professional guidance to others, they are in a special position compared to other PLC-leaders. However, they emphasize the professional support in their own academic environment, both for planning, conducting and evaluating meetings. They have also discussed the challenges and dilemmas that arise in the role of PLC leader and believe that in many ways they work as a separate professional learning community. The support they receive through the use of tools and models, but also through theory, is also highlighted in this context. In summary, they believe that the support has helped to increase their competence and confidence as PLC leaders, and to improve the quality of the PLC meetings. The informants also mention practical support when they are supervisors and PLC-leaders on assignment for schools or school owners. This can be in the form of deciding that processes should be carried out, but also in the form of concrete facilitation.

Leadership/facilitation in an online setting

The respondents have had different experiences of leading and facilitating PLC groups in an online setting. They have used various forms of online settings, including digital lectures for groups (so-called "on the wall"), situations where all participants in the PLC group have their own machine and camera, or a mix of the two. The respondents see several benefits of online interaction. It allows for flexibility in time and place and can make it easier for more people to participate. They agree that the dialog can be easier to manage if everyone sits on their own machine and only one person has the floor at a time.

The informants are divided on the challenges of online interaction. One of them feels that it can be difficult to create a good dialog and interaction online, especially if he/she is addressing a group of people using the same camera. Therefore, they want to get to know the groups face-to-face first. Others don't think this is as important - although face-to-face interaction is preferable, it is perceived as okay to facilitate online.

Academics with experience in establishing/supporting PLC groups at schools/ municipalities/ county councils/ universities

The informants, who are academics, have supported the establishment of PLC groups in various ways. This can include providing guidance and advice on how to establish and run a PLC group, sharing relevant research and knowledge about PLC, and offering practical support such as advising on group composition and meeting frequency. Depending on how they have been commissioned, the informants have taken different approaches. They have worked alone or in pairs if the client is a single school or a school owner. In some places, the work takes place through a national scheme for school development, in which case the entire professional group is involved. The work has also taken the form of publicly funded research, where groups of schools have been recruited. Consequently, there have been differences in how the professionals have interacted with school leaders or school owners. In some cases, they have collaborated directly with the local initiator, while in other situations it is someone other than the leader who has taken the initiative to start the PLC work, for example the researchers themselves. The academics express satisfaction with the collaboration among themselves. As a professional group, they find support in the internal processes and feel that they are in a continuous

learning process. The interview situation reveals an easy tone with humor, combined with determination, an expressed need for further learning and development, both in their role as PLC-leaders and as academics.

2 Focus group interview 2

Introduction

Group composition: Four principals (PLC-leader), each one leading a PLC-group of principals.
The interview was conducted digitally via Teams and lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Experiences as PLC group leaders

All the informants who participated in the interview have worked in schools, first as teachers, then heads of department, since the early 2000s. The informant with the longest experience in his role has worked as a principal for just under five years. Two out of four informants have participated in, and have knowledge and experience from PLC-work, since January 2020, while the other two have joined for the last two years. Today, they all work as PLC-leaders.

All four informants agree that the expectations of themselves in the role as leaders are high, and that they want to create learning meetings that give something back to the rest of the PLC group. They are concerned with "turning the mirror on themselves" rather than seeing what the others in the group could have done differently. In addition, they are concerned with relation. As an example, it is pointed out that on some occasions, if they have delved deeply into other people's action plans, they have made a phone call after the meeting to hear how the person in question experienced the situation. In addition, it is pointed out that being prepared, leading the meetings, and motivating the other group members are expectations they have of themselves.

It also emerges from the interview, on several occasions, that they actively use probing questions and summaries are actively used to create reflection and inquiry in the PLC groups they lead. The informants also have their own "meta-meetings" where they explore and reflect on the meetings themselves. All the informants point out that they have written down reflection questions in the PLC book that they use to create greater inquiry and to get deeper into the material.

Perceived challenges

Two of the four informants interviewed describe the motivation of the group members as part of the challenges they have faced. For example, it is pointed out that the expectations some participants have of what PLC is, do not necessarily match what PLC is. In addition, they describe other meetings/studies/political involvement as factors as a reason for high absenteeism, about 20% last year.

Another challenge mentioned is that when new members have joined the PLC groups, they on several occasions had to repeat/restart the PLC work. Restarting is highlighted as a challenge to keep participants motivation.

None of the informants highlighted specific difficulties in promoting inquiry and reflection in the PLC meetings. It is emphasized that the pre-written questions they have received through training have helped them here.

It is agreed that the size of the PLC itself can also be a decisive factor for success, based on their own experience in the facilitator meetings. Better with few participants than many. In addition, over the past year they have had two leaders (facilitators) per group. One who initially leads the group, and one who observes the leader and gives feedback, an organizational move that seems to have worked well.

Specific competencies and/or personality traits of a 'good' group leader

Discussion occurs in the focus group when we challenge the informants on what the characteristics of a "good" PLC-leader are. One of the informants points out that he looks for warmth, safe and trustworthy leaders when selecting PLC-leaders for his unit, while another informant said that warm and confident facilitators are nice, but that are not the most important qualities. He was looking more in the direction of "tough" leaders, who were able to grab people and steer the PLC work forward. The third informant wanted to emphasize motivation and commitment as important factors for a good leader. This principal also emphasized that being brave would help in terms of challenging colleagues. It should be noted that all three informants who spoke mentioned distinct, albeit different personality traits before specific competencies in their description of desired characteristics.

The three different combinations of personality traits emphasized by the different informants can be listed as follows:
- Confident, warm, and trustworthy.
- Committed, courageous.
- Structured, committed, tough.

Need for support/training

The training of the informants had received varied somewhat. The two of them who had participated from the beginning of January 2020 described that they had been through some training. The training came mainly from XX (name of a specific person). The other two informants who had joined more recently had also been trained by the same person but had to request the training themselves. They also mention the facilitator PLC that they are part of as a crucial support and success factor for introducing PLC in their own units. In addition, sessions with meta-PLC are driven by an *expert* who can challenge the PLC-leader on the way they lead, the way they ask questions, etc. The informants agree that they can also often rely on the ladder of inference, and the 3xU model as good tools.