

Focus group reports on the practices and needs of PLC leaders and facilitators



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Project-Team of the Workpackage

Peter Theurl, University of Education Vorarlberg (PHV)

Katharine Rümmele, University of Education Vorarlberg (PHV)

Eva Frick, University of Education Vorarlberg (PHV)



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1 Report on the interview of a single person

Introduction

A university faculty member was interviewed who has extensive experience in school and classroom development during his many years as a school principal and has led numerous PLGs at various levels (teachers, principals, mentors, students). The interview was conducted in person on February 1, 2024 and was tape-recorded with the participant's verbal consent.

A. Experience as a PLC moderator and leader

With regard to the management of a PLC, the participant distinguishes between two different management tasks: Leadership and support measures on a more structural level in the sense of a facilitator, as D. Wiliam uses the term, and measures on a more substantive level in the sense of substantive leadership. As a facilitator, you have to organize appointments and rooms, ensure that the meetings are recorded and, if necessary, provide time resources (e.g. for S-PLCs). As a content leader, you have to ensure this:

- that topics and objectives are developed or are available and that these are also worked on,
- that the meetings are structured and time is used effectively,
- that there is an atmosphere of trust in the group,
- that all members (can) participate,
- that action plans are developed and worked on,
- that reflection takes place,
- that members have access to task-oriented scientific literature and principles,
- that learning takes place among the participants and that they can build their development on a scientific basis.

The participant reported numerous factors that influence the effectiveness of the role of a leader or facilitator, both external and internal to the group or personality-related: external factors such as suitable premises, no or insufficient time resources, etc. and internal or personality-related factors such as lack of motivation of individual members, personal animosities between participants or lack of skills and competences of members. On the other hand, the participant pointed out that the members of a PLC are able to engage in learning processes if they are supported by a facilitator or a leader as described above.

B. Challenges

The challenges and difficulties depend very much on the group and are again on two levels:

a) **Facilitation:** It is often difficult,

- to find appointments,
- organize rooms,
- ensure that everyone is always present.

b) **Leadership:** The challenges are

- to create a climate of trust,
- ensuring that the action plans are taken seriously and implemented (especially in student PLCs),
- ensuring that all participants are actively involved in the meetings,
- asking the right questions that enable insight/development on the one hand and are not hurtful or demotivating on the other,
- provide participants with scientific answers to their questions,
- to develop the group so that it functions on its own and only needs me as an expert to provide it with knowledge.

Inquiry and reflection are difficult to implement. Reflection is somewhat easier because members understand very quickly that it benefits them. The focus on science often fails because group members have little time to engage with literature and science-oriented development is not highly valued in schools, at least in our part of the world.

C. Competencies and characteristics of a good PLC leader

The participant pointed out that a good PLC leader should be well structured and have certain basic organizational skills. To be able to lead a group well, you should at least have the skills that are essential for the functioning of a PLC:

- Ability to work in a team,
- Ability to reflect,
- empathy,
- structure,
- determination and solution orientation,
- openness,
- democratic attitude that enables others to participate in the group and solution process on an equal footing,
- ability to ask constructive questions,
- scientific attitude,
- reliability, etc.

Effective leadership and support are the basic prerequisite and the be-all and end-all of a functioning PLC. In more developed groups, the leadership role should be superfluous, which should also be the goal of every leader to make themselves superfluous!

D. Need for specific support/training

Support is very important and necessary. In Austria, there is a PLC of university lecturers in which problems and difficulties that arise in the various PLCs can be discussed and in which the participants help and support each other. A modular training program could also be helpful.

E. Leading and facilitating meetings in an online environment

The interviewee reported that some online sessions were held during the Corona pandemic, but these were soon discontinued because students could no longer go to the internships and the PLCs were therefore disbanded. The sessions were held via Zoom, but at that time no one had any experience with it and everyone was unable to conduct the sessions well simply due to technical inadequacies.

Basically, the interviewee is of the opinion that a well-functioning online PLC requires a very special leadership with high competencies in the field of online communication. Online PLC sessions have the same shortcomings (and possibly also advantages) as other forms of online communication, so they only make sense in very specific situations.

2 Report of the focus groups with student teachers

Introduction

For this report, members from two student focus groups were interviewed, which differed greatly in their objectives and therefore also in the framework conditions with regard to leadership and management and are therefore briefly described here for a better understanding.

The **first focus group (S-PLC-TP)** was made up of students who were led by a lecturer as a student PLC (S-PLC) during their first two day internships at an elementary school as part of the accompanying course "Analysis and Reflection". The lecturer took on the role of PLC leader by leading, moderating and structuring the approximately two-week meetings and introducing certain requirements, such as the creation of an action plan and the use of a joint team course. Four of the six members of the PLC, including one male, took part in the approximately one-hour interview, which took place in person on January 31, 2024 and was recorded with the consent of all participants. The students were at the end of their third semester of their bachelor's degree in primary education, aged between 20 and 30. With the exception of one student, who only joined the PLC in the second semester, all participants had already gained two semesters of experience in this learning community.

The **second focus group (S-PLC-IP)**, consisting of students specializing in "Inclusive Pedagogy", initially worked on a common goal as a PLC for one semester as part of a seminar. After theoretical input from the lecturer, who acted as an external facilitator, the students worked largely independently in their groups. The lecturer was responsible for the theoretical introduction to the PLC work, presented the work assignment, supported the students in forming the PLCs and created the necessary framework conditions for their work. During the semester, she provided support and advice to the PLCs. Due to the positive experiences and effective collaboration, the group decided to continue their involvement in the PLC in the following semester and to plan and carry out a gender project on the topic of "Typical girls - typical boys" for two fourth-grade classes as part of the focus internships. Here, too, the lecturer acted as a facilitator from outside and only intervened to provide support where necessary, allowing the students to work even more autonomously than in the previous semester. The interview with the four female students, who were between 22 and 32 years old, took place at the end of their 7th semester, after they had completed the focus projects. The online survey via Zoom was conducted on February 22, 2024 and recorded with the consent of all participants.

The evaluation of the two focus group interviews was conducted via an anonymous online questionnaire, with a response rate of only 50% in both groups. The audio files of both interviews were transcribed using the "Transkriptor" program and finally summarized and comparatively evaluated for this report using the interview guiding questions (Table 1). Due to the different framework conditions of the PLCs interviewed, the results of the two focus groups are first considered individually and then summarized in a concluding summary.

A. Experiences with PLCs and the management of PLCs

Focus group 1 (S-PLC-TP)

In this focus group, it was reported that the PLC meetings were always prepared, moderated and chaired by the lecturer, who was considered an integral part of each meeting. Her tasks included setting the agenda and the next steps in consultation with the students, maintaining an overview and leading the meetings. The PLC aimed to achieve common and individual goals, whereby the action plan provided by the management helped to consistently pursue these goals and keep an eye on personal development. The regular meetings focused on exchange and reflection through discussion, which enabled students to broaden their horizons and talk openly about everything. This open communication and trusting atmosphere were considered important in relation to both fellow students and lecturers.

For all participants, both students and lecturers, a certain openness and willingness to listen and accept feedback is fundamental. It is particularly important for students that this openness and honesty remain without negative consequences. It is also important to them that their opinions and views are taken seriously by the PLC management. The manager should adopt a democratic attitude, allow changes, discuss them with the students and make adjustments, if necessary, whereby flexibility, openness and active listening are considered to be particularly important. One student emphasizes the importance of the principle "What is discussed in the PLC stays in the PLC", stressing that trust is essential, including the trust that this principle also applies to the lecturers as PLC leaders. The authenticity, credibility and tangible reliability of this attitude on the part of the lecturers is of great importance to the students.

When asked about the possibility of students taking on the role of leader or moderator in the S-PLC on a rotating basis, there is agreement that this would only make sense from the second semester at the earliest in order to gain sufficient routine. The students recognize the benefits of such experiences for their later professional life, but feel more secure and supported when an experienced lecturer leads the sessions. The role of the students should be limited to moderation, without their own knowledge input, as this is seen as overwhelming and could exceed their competence limits. The importance of lecturers retaining leadership of the content as experts is emphasized, as this is also important for the professional development of students.

It would be conceivable for students to take on moderating roles in the PLC from the second semester of PLC work onwards, but they attach importance to an atmosphere of equality and the avoidance of an authoritarian attitude on the part of lecturers. They would like lecturers to act as mentors who offer support without exerting pressure. It is important that lecturers are willing to share responsibility and have confidence in the students' abilities. Careful preparation for this task by lecturers is necessary to ensure the quality of the PLC work. Nevertheless, students ultimately prefer that lecturers remain in charge in order to ensure the seriousness and effectiveness of the PLC.

Focus group 2 (S-PLC-IP)

In this focus group, the participants had been working in an independently managed PLC for two semesters, in contrast to another group with continuous lecturer leadership. The autonomy in the PLC

was perceived as positive and beneficial, and the benefits of exchanging ideas and jointly developing solutions were particularly emphasized. Reflecting together on progress achieved and opportunities for improvement for future goals was seen by the students as a central component of the collaboration.

The students found the given structures such as MS Teams as a platform, action plans and meeting minutes, as well as taking on specific roles within the group, conducive to constructive collaboration. Roles such as secretary and a leading function ("boss") were seen as helpful for teamwork at the same level. The leader had the task of moderating the meeting, ensuring work efficiency and goal orientation. These roles were rotated in each meeting, which enabled a fair distribution of tasks. However, the students found that some people were better suited to leadership roles and showed more interest in taking on these roles. Therefore, the group came to the conclusion that it would be more beneficial if the leadership role was taken on permanently by a person with the appropriate skills and comfort in this role.

Comparison and conclusion

- a) Leadership structure:** While focus group 1 emphasizes the importance of experienced leadership by lecturers, focus group 2 emphasizes the advantages of self-administration and autonomy with a preference for a permanent assumption of the leadership role by competent students.
- b) Understanding of roles and participation:** Focus group 1 sees students more in a moderating role with support from lecturers, while focus group 2 promotes the active assumption of responsibility and leadership roles by the students themselves.
- c) Communication and atmosphere:** Both groups value an open and trusting communication culture, with focus group 1 additionally emphasizing the importance of experience and support from lecturers.

The different approaches of both focus groups show various ways in which PLCs can be organized and managed to promote effective learning and professional development. While strong leadership by lecturers provides security and structure, greater student autonomy can increase initiative and engagement.

B. Challenges

Focus group 1 (S-PLC-TP)

In the first focus group, specific challenges in relation to PLC leadership by lecturers were identified. A key issue is the conflict between the role of lecturers as assessors and as facilitators who are expected to create a trusting and safe environment. The balance between assessment and facilitation is crucial to prevent students feeling monitored and afraid to express themselves freely.

Regarding the possibility of students taking on the leadership or facilitation of the PLC, there is a consensus that experience and understanding of the PLC concept through the guidance of lecturers is necessary first. This should avoid excessive demands and ensure the quality of the PLC work. The students also emphasize that guided reflection by the lecturers is essential, as without sufficient practice

and specialist knowledge, group reflection could suffer and the intensity of the discussion of topics could decrease.

Focus group 2 (S-PLC-IP)

The students identify different working methods, work attitudes and quality standards within the group as major challenges for the PLC and its leadership. Resulting power struggles and conflicts could require the involvement of an external person, such as the lecturer (as a facilitator), for mediation. Another important issue is maintaining motivation within the PLC. The leader should be able to motivate, but external facilitators (lecturers) could also be supportive, especially after setbacks, to encourage the group and steer it in the right direction. An open dialog at eye level between students and lecturers is crucial for dealing productively with conflicts and challenges. A balance of control and trust that takes individual needs into account promotes a positive communication culture. This is essential if students are to feel comfortable speaking openly and involving lecturers when difficulties arise, so that the quality of PLC work does not suffer from a lack of communication.

Comparison and conclusion

In the first focus group (S-PLC-TP), which worked as a PLC with lecturer leadership, the main challenge discussed was the **possible excessive demands** of students taking over leadership at an early stage. In the second focus group (S-PLC-IP), which shares its experiences as a self-directed student PLC, dealing with different working styles and the resulting **conflicts** as well as maintaining **work motivation** are addressed as possible challenges. The challenge of **role conflict** for lecturers, which is discussed in both focus groups, addresses the need to find a balance between the role of assessor and facilitator in order to create an atmosphere of trust and communicate effectively with students on an equal footing. This balance is essential to ensure that students do not feel observed or judged, which could affect their willingness to open up and actively participate in the PLC process. Lecturers face the challenge of simultaneously providing support without undermining students' autonomy and initiative.

C. Competencies and characteristics of good PLC management

Focus group 1 (S-PLC-TP)

The focus group participants consistently emphasized that the success of the student PLC depends largely on the interaction and behavior of the lecturers in their role as PLC leaders. An open discussion of challenges and reflection on one's own limitations are only possible in an atmosphere of trust and equality. The importance of meeting at eye level is emphasized, as this creates an essential basis of trust and makes it possible to deal openly with one another. A hierarchical distance created by the lecturer's behavior, on the other hand, can significantly limit the openness and willingness of students to participate. The core competencies, characteristics and tasks of lecturers as PLC leaders mentioned in the focus group include

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- a) **Professional skills:** As experts in PLC work and the day placement, lecturers should be able to introduce PLC work, develop action plans, guide reflection and provide constructive feedback. In addition, professional support in lesson planning and the contribution of specialist knowledge is required.
 - b) **Democratic skills:** Appreciation and trust are essential for an encounter at eye level. Lecturers should be open to suggestions, be able to delegate responsibility, work in a dialog-oriented manner and promote a positive error culture.
 - c) **Personal skills:** Flexibility, openness, competent discussion skills, empathy, congruence and the ability to self-reflect are key qualities that make an effective and supportive PLC leader.

Focus group 2 (S-PLC-IP)

Participants in the second focus group emphasize the importance of various **competencies and tasks for students as internal PLC leaders**. These include:

- a) **Professional skills:** These include conversational skills, facilitation techniques, conflict management, active listening, PLC competence (knowledge of structure, role, processes), methodological knowledge (group work/collaboration methods) and digital competence.
- b) **Democratic competencies:** Include basic democratic attitude with an appreciative, respectful approach and the promotion of participation.
- c) **Personal skills:** Include a sense of responsibility, leadership skills, openness, calmness, organizational skills, empathy, social skills, problem-solving skills and motivational skills.

One student notes that lecturers as external facilitators should have similar skills to the internal PLC leaders, especially in terms of problem solving, communication skills and empathy, while they should bring in more knowledge in technical areas. Lecturers are also required to communicate the concept of Professional Learning Communities, create good structures and support students in developing a PLC routine. It is particularly valuable to provide support in the event of conflicts or to encourage motivation, as well as to provide specialist expertise. For effective collaboration and support, it is essential that lecturers treat students as equals and partially relinquish control and leadership in their role as facilitator. Having a say in determining the work assignment, for example, promotes motivation and identification with the topic and enables a personal learning effect. The students appreciate freedom in terms of content and design, group organization based on personal needs and increasing autonomy in the course of the PLC work. The relationship with the lecturers, characterized by a working relationship and the opportunity to communicate at eye level, is seen as essential for overcoming internal conflicts and difficulties. An open and trusting relationship makes it easier for students to address problems and promotes a climate in which honest feelings and thoughts can be shared.

Comparison and conclusion

The analysis of the experiences of both focus groups shows that professional, democratic and personal skills are regarded as fundamental prerequisites for the effective management of a CPC. Both groups

emphasize the importance of these areas of competence, whereby differences - depending on the type of CPC - mainly arise in the practical implementation and focus of these competences. Here too, both focus groups particularly emphasized the role of the lecturers, who must meet the students at eye level in order to create a trusting and inclusive learning environment. This meeting at eye level is crucial for promoting self-confidence and personal responsibility among students, which in turn supports successful PLC work.

D. Need for specific support/training

Focus group 1 (S-PLC-TP)

Following the discussion about the skills required of lecturers as PLC leaders, the students in the first focus group were asked whether they thought these could be learned in a course or training session. Here too, the students named one thing above all as a basic prerequisite: the willingness to relinquish their own "power role" and to see themselves as equals. This attitude makes it possible to learn the skills required for PLC work. It is emphasized that, in addition to the willingness to change roles, the personality and emotional intelligence of the lecturers also play an important role. In order to develop the necessary skills, the students consider it useful to attend training courses in which, in addition to the necessary specialist knowledge about PLCs, communication skills and conversation techniques in particular should be taught. These include active listening, counseling, coaching and moderation techniques as well as methods for reflection and feedback.

Focus group 2 (S-PLC-IP)

In this context, the focus group participants were asked whether, after these two semesters of working together as a PLC, they would now see themselves in a position to present the working method to a teaching staff, for example, and to initiate and lead PLCs there. In principle, the students feel able to do this, although they express uncertainty regarding their specialist background knowledge of PLCs. For effective training for PLC leaders, they emphasize the importance of a comprehensive introduction to the concept and benefits of PLC work, with a particular focus on the different roles and areas of responsibility within a PLC. Teaching a democratic mindset is considered essential, emphasizing that all members, including the leadership, should work together as equals.

The students find it useful to present specific PLC projects and their working methods in the training and to demonstrate realistic time frames for processes within the PLC work. The provision of working materials such as templates for action plans and meeting minutes as well as tools for effective group work is seen as important. In addition, the training should include skills in discussion and conflict management. Participants also emphasize the importance of self-awareness as part of the training in order to experience the PLC process first-hand and develop a deeper understanding of PLC work. This practical insight is intended to consolidate the theoretical knowledge and help the participants decide whether the PLC concept is suitable for them.

Comparison and conclusion

Both groups see the need for specific training for PLC leaders in order to develop the necessary skills and understanding to successfully lead PLCs. While focus group 1 particularly emphasizes the personality and emotional intelligence of lecturers and the need for training, focus group 2 emphasizes practical application and self-awareness in training. The recommendations of both groups emphasize the importance of a democratic attitude, the promotion of communication skills and the willingness to question traditional power structures in order to enable effective and equal cooperation in PLCs.

E. Leading/facilitating meetings in an online environment

As this topic was not discussed in the interview with the first focus group (S-PLC-TP), all of the following results relate to the interview with the **second focus group (S-PLC-IP)**. The students highlighted the use of online meetings via Zoom as a practical solution for working together efficiently despite living in different locations and traveling long distances. The time saved through online meetings was seen as a decisive advantage. However, the lack of direct contact was also identified as a challenge that makes communication more difficult, especially if the group members do not yet know each other well. To counteract this problem, the interviewees recommended holding the first and occasional further meetings in person to enable them to get to know each other better. The limitations in non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, are mentioned as a disadvantage of online meetings, as it is more difficult to assess the reactions and commitment of the other participants. Preparation for online meetings requires clear agreements, for example regarding the provision and presentation of materials in advance. For online PLC meetings to be successful, it is essential that all participants are technically proficient and have a stable internet connection. The PLC leader should not only be familiar with the technology, but also with online collaboration tools that facilitate collaboration. In addition, specific online etiquette rules are considered important to ensure productive collaboration, such as turning on the camera, avoiding interruptions and focusing on the meeting. The PLC leadership is also tasked with ensuring fair speaking time allocation and effective time management to make the most of online meetings.

3 Report of the faculty members' focus group

Introduction

In February 2024, a focus group interview was conducted with 5 lecturers (all female) at the Vorarlberg University of Teacher Education. Three of the interviewees are professors of educational sciences, one works in the Department of Mathematics (subject didactics) and one in the Department of German (subject didactics). All of them have several years of experience as moderators and leaders of student PLCs and are themselves members of a lecturer PLC at the university.

The students who take part in the PLCs are in their second and third semester at the university and complete an internship in which they spend one day a week at a school for two semesters and gain their first experience of teaching and the teaching profession. During the internship, they are supervised by a member of the teaching staff and have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and work on their professional development in an accompanying seminar led by the same professor. These accompanying seminars are held as PLCs and take place every two weeks.

The interview took place online via Zoom, lasted around two hours and was recorded on video with the consent of all participants. The guiding questions were made available to the participants a few days before the interview.

A. Experiences as moderators and session leaders of a PLC

The interviewees agree that effective support for student PLCs depends heavily on the age and experience of the students. Younger students in particular, such as those in the PLCs accompanying internships, require closer support, both at the level of the PLC leader and at the level of the facilitator.

For **more experienced/older students**, it's mainly about:

- Provide input on how PLCs work and how a PLC meeting is run,
- discuss work assignments,
- help students to familiarize themselves with PLCs,
- provide space and time within the course time,
- respond to needs,
- check whether students are coping with the work process, whether everything is working, whether there are any questions, etc.

Basically, the faculty members interviewed reported that their role as PLC leaders included the following tasks, which they described as moderation tasks:

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- structure the whole thing: Place, time, create an agenda, take minutes, control the whole process,
 - define framework conditions and demand compliance with them,
 - Being a timekeeper,
 - demanding fulfillment of duties (e.g. processing action plans),
 - to let everyone have their say,
 - create transitions,
 - create summaries,
 - being flexible and responding to current needs,
 - Encourage reflection,
 - introduce topics
 - Build trust within the group
 - meet students at eye level so that they dare to communicate openly,
 - Developing a common set of values.

The interviewees expressed the wish that they would like to be part of the group because this would enable a more democratic leadership style, in which the students are given responsibility, moderation and leadership would/could alternate, the lead can be consciously handed over (e.g. say: OK, you prepare this input). Due to the special situation in a student PLC, which is led by teachers, there is always an imbalance through which the leaders are perceived in their role as teachers and the students orient themselves towards them and thus always have the lead.

The PLC leaders surveyed pursue a variety of goals in their work, which can be summarized in three groups:

- a) Firstly, students should acquire basic **skills and competencies** that are important for working in PLCs, such as
- learning to give each other feedback,
 - that they learn to plan co-constructively and exchange ideas, etc.
- b) On the other hand, students should keep their development goals and their **professional development** in focus and develop them in a critically reflective manner, particularly with regard to their tasks as teachers:
- the clear professionalization of students as teachers,
 - to sensitize them to their role as a teacher,
 - to sensitize them to personal development areas,
 - to enable participants to think critically and reflectively about their role as a teacher and their specific actions in the teaching situation
 - to keep an eye on the development goals that the members have set themselves and to keep bringing them back to the actual aspects and concerns.

c) And finally, the interviewees are primarily concerned with getting the students to the point where they are able to carry out their **work in the PLC in a self-directed and self-responsible manner**, making the management function superfluous:

- to actually get members of the PLC thinking and actively involved in the debate
- always act in a solution-oriented manner and with a focus on the students,
- get students to actively introduce topics into the PLC meetings
- to get students to take responsibility for their own PLC work.

In terms of factors influencing the effectiveness of PLC management, a large number were mentioned, which can be subsumed into the following categories:

a) Structural/external factors:

This refers to conditions that enable and support PLC work, such as

- Framework conditions such as time slots that are optimal,
- suitable rooms where it is simply quiet, where there is space,
- Seating arrangements conducive to communication (e.g. U-shape or circle), etc.
- Know about the purpose of a PLC
- Work on specific cases

a) Process/internal factors

A second group of intervening factors comprises the internal structure and nature of the group:

- Trust in each other and in the management,
- Group rules,
- atmosphere of openness and trust,
- Talking openly about problems so that the members realize that the others have similar problems,
- experiencing the group as a safe space,
- Motivation of the participants
- Participants' experience of self-efficacy

c) Leadership skills

The third group comprises the direct leadership skills of the PLC management on both a professional and personal level:

- Professional competence of the management
- Diligence and commitment of the leader (e.g. in feedback, etc.)
- Appreciation of the participants,
- constant guidance of participants to "Reflection on Action"
- Participation in the developmental steps of the participants

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- Democratic leadership, responding to participants' needs, changing structures and content if necessary
 - Competence of the leader to create trusting framework conditions
 - Professionalism of the leader

a) Support measures

The interviewees mentioned specific support measures that have a positive influence on the quality of PLC work:

- Create motivation by finding aspects that are important to the participants, in which they would like to improve, for which there is a need,
- Intrinsically motivating in small steps
- Encouragement and targeted questioning,
- Provide questioning techniques,
- Provide information and input on specific issues,
- Encourage the group to suggest solutions to colleagues when problems arise
- Giving tips, offering ideas for solutions

Finally, the PLC leaders interviewed also mentioned (indirect) indicators by which they can recognize the success of their leadership behavior, such as the professional development of the PLC members, their active participation in the individual sessions, the openness of the participants, the mutual trust among them, the quality of the feedback they give to other group members and the ability to accept critical feedback that concerns them. The success of the management is directly visible through positive feedback from the participants to the PLC management, when participants wish to continue the PLC in other internships and when the course reflection by the quality management is positive.

B. Challenges

One challenge is the beginning of a new PLC and the PLC work. It was found that it is necessary to actively participate as a moderator and take on a stronger role as a facilitator.

Another aspect in this context is that the participants must first find each other as a group in order to be able to function and work as a PLC.

In this context, the third aspect contents the creating of the framework conditions or a climate in which the participants can build trust. Only then the next aspect, de-privatization – in this case the de-privatization of difficulties, learning fields, etc., but also of planning – can be successful. Challenges that can be found in the interpersonal area, such as working with other students (e.g., in team teaching, as tandem partners, etc.), but also getting along with the training teacher, are factors that can negatively influence the cooperation which takes place within the PLC, among other things. The clash of different characters (e.g., in terms of work attitude, reliability, etc.) can lead to conflicts that need to be resolved by the moderator.

One challenge concerns the science-oriented development of students and how this can be initiated and implemented within the framework of the S-PLC.

Furthermore, guiding students towards a critical-reflective attitude has proven to be challenging with the aim of further professional development, i.e. making participants responsible for their own professional development.

One aspect of the challenges, which was mentioned by faculty team members, is the discrepancy for the moderator between being a member of the PLC on the one hand and taking on the role of moderator or facilitator on the other. This conflicting role of being on an equal footing with the participants of the S-PLC on the one side and being a teacher who assesses the students on the other side must be mastered professionally.

A final, essential challenge for the moderators is to convey the added value of working in a PLC to the participants of the S-PLC. First and foremost, the additional effort is seen; the actual added value, the personal professionalization, is not visible at the beginning of the PLC work. This requires the facilitator to constantly demand the application of the action plan, feedback, etc.

C. Competencies and characteristics of a good facilitator

Several points are mentioned as part of the competencies that are required to be valued as a good facilitator.

On the one hand, one aspect is the effectiveness as a facilitator, visible through the approachable, positive behavior of the participants towards the PLC. Building trust - both with the facilitator and with the other participants - plays an essential role. Only if this requirement is given it is possible to open up and address more in-depth topics.

Another aspect of the characteristics of a good facilitator is authenticity. If a facilitator is perceived as authentic, this can be seen as a positive mechanism of action in terms of building trust, openness, etc. in the context of S-PLC.

It is also important to ensure that all participants report to each other - not just to the facilitator. To this end, it is necessary to sensitize the participants to the fact that the S-PLC only works if, among other things, the participants meet each other at eye level, value each other and can meet each other so openly that even fewer positive aspects can also be reported and feedback or suggestions from other participants can be accepted. For example, it may be necessary to point out to the participants that they should report to the whole group, so that the facilitator redirects the person who is currently reporting to the other participants.

On the other hand, it is important to enable the participants to act critically and reflectively, i.e. that the facilitator makes sure that the participants are enabled to think critically and reflectively about their role as a teacher, their actions in the teaching situation, to recognize possible potential for improvement and to be aware of this in the next teaching units. The next step under this aspect is reflection at a meta-level, the so-called Reflection ON Action.

One of the skills required as a facilitator in a PLC is to recognize the aspects that are of real concern to the participants and which they would like to improve. Knowledge of various questioning techniques is important for this.

Another aspect is one's own knowledge, one's own professionalism as a facilitator, so that information, input on a topic, but also examples of suitable development goals can be given professionally.

The key competencies thus include one's own professionalism as a facilitator with regard to the topics that arise for the students, i.e. professional expertise or specialist knowledge, and to the content concerning PLC work, the facilitation skills to be able to ensure an adequate framework for the PLC work, personal skills and classic leadership skills, which are evident, for example, in dealing with resistance, as well as the attitude and mindset of a facilitator.

D. Need for specific support/training

There is a consistent need for specific support. One of the main aspects is participation in the teachers' PLC, which provides a framework for exchanging and reflecting, seeking advice, experiencing self-awareness, etc. Additional measures such as further training in moderation skills, questioning techniques, (person-centered) conversation techniques or tools in the context of coaching measures such as team-building measures, conversation techniques, dealing with resistance and conflict management are considered useful.

Therefore, support is very important and necessary. In Austria, there is a PLC of university lecturers in which problems and difficulties that arise in the various PLCs can be discussed and in which the participants help and support each other. A modular training program could also be helpful.

E. Leading and facilitating meetings in an online environment

Difficulties in the implementation of online sessions were:

- The unreliable presence of participants
- Less peace and quiet (e.g., participation in pairs in front of one screen)
- Technical requirements (e.g., internet connection)
- Creation of an appropriate, necessary atmosphere
- Eye contact hardly or not at all possible compared to the face-to-face setting

Extended online PLC rules may be necessary, e.g.:

- No participation from a moving car or train
- Everyone has to provide the necessary framework conditions such as time, space, connection, etc.; i.e. tasks must be taken on here in terms of personal responsibility that would otherwise be taken on by the facilitator
- Use of different, diverse tools for online meetings

One advantage of online meetings is the time aspect, i.e. it is easier to find a time slot as there is no need to travel. Under certain circumstances, this can also have a positive effect on motivation to participate.