Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP

Focus group reports on learning communities/PLC leaders' and facilitators'

Nicosia

2024

LeaFaP

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

Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP

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

Project-Team of the Workpackage (alphabetical order)
Loucas Louca, European University Cyprus (EUC)
Elena Stylianidou, European University Cyprus (EUC)

Content

1 Introduction and Methods

This focuses on the experiences of external facilitators within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The 3 participating external facilitators, all females, work at the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI), where their main work duties are related to the facilitation of PLCs in the public education system in Cyprus (kindergarten, elementary, and middle schools). All three have many years of extensive experience in facilitating PLCs across various levels of education.

Data collection was collected through structured personal interviews, providing rich material for the analysis of their roles, the processes they follow, and the mutual support that develops within the educational process.

The interviews were automatically transcribed by MS TEAMS and then were comparatively analysed to identify common emerging themes.

Below we highlight the main themes that emerged from the interviews, emphasizing the role of PLC external facilitators and examining various aspects of the support processes they provide and receive. In doing this we seek to provide a detailed description of the dynamics and challenges faced by external facilitators of PLCs in the public educational context of Cyprus.

2 Findings

Needs for Support and Training

Participant 1 characterized the support process of PLCs as **highly demanding**, highlighting her linguistic background and decade-long **experience** in the educational field in secondary schools, where she supports PLCs at secondary education schools.

Participant 2 talked about the five different groups (all in kindergarten schools) she supports this school year, focusing on the challenges and differences among them. She emphasized her role in kindergarten PLCs and talked about the independence of one of her groups that continues its PLC journey for the third consecutive year.

Participant 3 has a **diverse support experience**, engaging with PLCs in primary schools, kindergarten schools, and a technical/vocational high school. She highlighted the **need for differentiation** in the topics discussed in the different PLCs and the **different difficulties she faces in the different PLCs**.

Comparative Analysis

Overall, the participants presented a cohesive picture of **facilitation experiences**, covering various **school types** and **school levels**, with an emphasis on the **demanding nature**, **diversity of the PLC groups**, and the need for differentiation based on the different PLCs.

Role of PLC's Facilitators/Factors Influencing the Role

Participant 1 stated that she plays an **active role in helping PLC participants to identify their needs and formulate the corresponding professional learning program**. Firstly, she **seeks the participation of a wider range of colleagues**, recognizing the importance of collective engagement. Towards that she begins with a briefing of the Teachers' Association leaders, providing detailed information about the PLC program and the expectations from the participating teachers. Working with PLC groups, she **guides** the needs identification process by conducting sessions with individual PLCs. During these sessions, she **encourages colleagues to freely express** their concerns, needs, and expectations regarding their professional development. With clarity and persistence, Participant 1 explores the issues that concern teachers, **promoting a comprehensive understanding of the challenges** they face. While **analyzing the PLC participants' needs**, Participant 1 creates an organized list, categorizing issues revealed. This process allows for the **identification of key themes** and focuses on aspects that broadly concern the educational system. Additionally, she **undertakes the management of the process** while keeping her colleagues informed about the steps to be followed. Her active intervention during these phases **enhances mutual understanding** and encourages the active participation of teachers in shaping the educational environment.

Participant 2 talked about the realities of the schools and indicated her striving to **maintain a balance** between the tools she uses to support the PLC groups and the practices feasible within the school context. She described her role as a **PLC companion**, offering sincere support and encouragement. In this context, she focuses on **inspiring and supporting teachers in their reflection for their professional growth**. Similar to Participant 1, she aims to **create an environment where teachers**

feel free to express their ideas and exchange views. She seeks **flexibility**, **adapting her support** to the needs and realities of each school. In her role, she aims to **create bonds and relationships among participating teachers**, promoting the concept of PLC. She focuses on **cultivating individual and group skills**, **monitoring the team's dynamics**, and **ensuring that the individual level is not neglected**. Overall, her role as a facilitator is connected to the need for **balanced support, adapted to the realities of each school, with an emphasis on reflection and exploration, collaboration, and the creation of a learning community.**

Participant 3 described her role as a **critical friend** with communication between PLC members being her main focus. She sets the goal of **collaboration** and **productive communication** within the PLC groups and tries to **encourage mutual listening** among PLC members, **promoting respect for differences** and individual peculiarities. Participant 3 described an example of the promotion of an environment where PLC members can express their opinions openly without fear of criticism. Through her questions, she indicated, that she **attempts to understand how members perceive reality**, how they act based on it, and how they can collaborate effectively. Additionally, Participant 3 systematically **poses questions** aimed at **creating collective goals** and developing the group. Her questions focus on "what concerns us" and "how can we improve," encouraging collective reflection and professional development.

Comparative Analysis

Overall, the three facilitators demonstrated significant commonalities in their perception of their role and their approach to the educational environment. All of them feel that they play an **active role in highlighting the needs** of teachers and **formulating professional learning programs**. At each phase of the process, they **support collaboration and collective participation**. They also **engage in dialogical processes** for PLC needs recognition, and they aim to **create a learning environment that promotes reflection and collaboration**.

Support for the PLC Members

Participant 1 felt that her **role was critical in the professional learning support program** process as part of the PLC cycle of the school year, due to her contribution to the professional development of the PLC members. Her role as a facilitator begins before the start of the training, with **continuous communication and preparation** for this process. The extensive information she provides in advance **ensures that the training will be tailored to the specific needs of each PLC**, **acting as a connection between the external training** (that will visit the PLC as a specialist) **and the PLC group**. During the training, Participant 1 stresses the importance of **providing clear, detailed directions for the implementation of new knowledge acquired**, seeking to support participating teachers to **connect theory and practice**. This support is expressed through **examples** and **practical advice**, engaging teachers in the simple absorption and use of new data. Additionally, she emphasized the importance of the **development of a common theoretical background** between the PLC participants, which can enhance the shared understanding among PLC members. In the implementation phase of the PLC cycle, Participant 1 described that she provides **continuous support for the effective implementation of reflection and exploration in the everyday teaching** of the PLC members. Her **collaboration with each**

PLC internal coordinator further supports the effective coordination of specialization with the needs of each educator. Evidence of effectiveness includes **evaluation of participating PLC members**, showing positive responses from participants, and improvement in educational practices. The evaluation is formally conducted by the CPI. Furthermore, data collection includes **student questionnaires**, offering a comprehensive picture of the impact of new skills in the school environment. Finally, **continuous communication and exchange of opinions** strengthen the PLC and serve as another indicator of effective support.

Participant 2 described her role as crucial in **supporting the professional learning** of the PLC members through the professional learning support program. She suggested that one of her key approaches is the **creation of a collaborative group**, where teachers with different professional and pedagogical backgrounds meet to discuss issues and determine common goals. Participant 2 also promotes activities that **enhance collaboration**, thus helping participants create a strong community. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of **developing a common theoretical background**, encouraging colleagues to understand different approaches, and establish common values and goals. **Reflection and exploration** are crucial parts of her support, with Participant 2 **providing opportunities for individual and group reflection,** allowing teachers to evolve personally and professionally. She also indicated that she **promotes the enhancement of learning** through well-structured teamwork, a common theoretical background, and reflection and exploration, thus shaping a productive environment for continuous professional development (CPD). **Evidence**, she suggested, indicating the success of learning in PLCs includes **evaluations** from the CPI and **informal assessments from teachers**, providing information about emotional empowerment, personal and professional skill development, and the creation of a positive learning environment.

Participant 3's learning support process focuses on the **development of teachers** and the **enhancement of their educational practices**. Initially, she **conducts a systematic analysis of the needs and challenges faced by teachers**. This initial phase is based on questionnaires, collaborative discussions, and reflective processes. Subsequently, Participant 3 **designs and implements customized professional learning support programs** tailored to PLC members' specific needs. She employs the Lesson Stadtwald Grounds methodology, which combines **action research with structured reflective processes**. PLC teachers participate in seminars, workshops, and sessions, using digital tools and questionnaires for data collection. Participant 3 **facilitates collaborative discussions**, **encouraging participants to exchange opinions**, **raise questions**, and **explore common issues**. Additionally, this process involves **continuous alternation between theoretical frameworks and practical exercises**, strengthening the connection between theory and practice. Participant 3 suggested playing a central role in **shaping an encouraging environment** where teachers are free to express concerns, propose ideas, and seek common solutions. Participant 3 **evaluates** the effectiveness of her support in two main ways. Firstly, she **observes changes** in how her colleagues reflect and share practices among themselves. This provides indications of how their educational approach is evolving and how they interact with new ideas. Secondly, she focuses on the PLC's culture and **observes changes in this culture**. She notes how PLC participating teachers engage in professional dialogue and focus on essential learning issues rather than simple discussions about their daily lives. This change in communication highlights their focus on promoting children's learning. Observation of changes primarily occurs through informal observation, while **assessments take place during interim and final evaluations**. In this phase, PLC participating

teachers document changes they have observed in their practices, specifying the initiatives they have taken and the changes they have made to the educational process.

Comparative Analysis

The participants agree on several common elements regarding their approach to supporting learning in PLCs. One is the use of **customized professional learning support programs** for PLC groups **based on a systematic analysis of the needs and challenges of teachers**. A second is the **rigorous collection and analysis of data**, both as a tool for identifying the needs of PLC members and the results of their actions, and also evaluating the facilitator's contribution to the PLC work.

A third common element identified is **the processes they all use in supporting the PLC work/cycle throughout the school year**. All three begin with a pre-training phase, continuous communication, and groundwork preparation to ensure that the training adapts to the specific needs of the school and each individual educator. Additionally, during the training, they provide directions for implementing new knowledge and seek to connect theory with practice.

A fourth common element is the **emphasis on collaboration to strengthen PLCs**. All three promote collaboration, encourage discussion, exchange of opinions, and the creation of common goals. Moreover, they underline the importance of the development of a shared theoretical background to strengthen mutual understanding among PLC participating teachers. They emphasize reflection and questioning as fundamental means of supporting learning.

During the implementation phase, they offer **continuous support for the effective integration of new skills into daily teaching**. They **collaborate with the internal PLC coordinators** for efficient coordination of each PLC's work. The evaluation of the PLC facilitation resulting from the CPI serves as an evidential element about the PLC function. This enhances continuous adaptation and improvement of their support, simultaneously providing additional insights into the effectiveness of the PLC program.

Support for the PLC Members

Participant 1 discussed numerous challenges related to the creation and support of PLCs. Firstly, she emphasized the demanding nature of the PLC process, **requiring significant time** and effort from teachers. She also highlighted the need for **more colleagues to be involved** and the difficulty of persuading others to participate actively. A significant challenge is the **lack of external incentives for the teachers**, as the current teacher evaluation system is perceived as punitive, focusing more on disciplinary aspects rather than on enhancing pedagogical practices. The **lack of support from school principals** and coordinators of the CPD poses a barrier, as their indifference or absence can negatively impact the creation and effectiveness of the PLCs. Furthermore, Participant 1 pointed out challenges arising from the **roles distribution**, such as the role of the school head and the CPD coordinator, as well as **teachers' resistance to change** and the **lack of a culture that encourages collaboration and reflection**. Lastly, she mentioned the challenge of **ironic comments** and resistance from teachers who may **consider these PLC efforts insignificant compared to the burdens of daily teaching**.

According to Participant 2, the challenges she faces pertain to various levels. Firstly, she emphasized the **need for flexibility** on the facilitator's part to adapt to the different needs and expectations of

individuals in the school environment. A crucial factor, she mentioned, is the **expectations from the schools**, requiring a shift in the facilitator's role to not only provide solutions but to support the reflection and evolution of the school environment. The aspect of **time** is critical, as a facilitator's visit to a school requires time for in-depth discussions, supporting reflective practices, and implementing methodologies based on pedagogical principles. Limited time poses challenges in achieving profound impact and support. Regarding questioning and reflection, she highlighted the **difficulty of involving children in the learning process of their teachers**, as they perceive teachers as authoritative figures. She underscored the need for teachers to persuade to interpret their roles pedagogically, facing the challenge of changing children's perceptions of their roles in the learning process.

Participant 3 faced numerous challenges in her role as well. Firstly, the **significance of her readiness and self-analysis to understand her role as a facilitator** is highlighted. The challenge of **balancing different roles**, ranging from being a specialist to a teacher, was also emphasized. A primary challenge is the need for **efficient time management**, both for teachers and the school, for listening and providing support. **Time pressure** becomes a challenge in reflection and taking action for improvement. Additionally, the success of changes requires **collaboration and coordination among teachers and school head(s)**. **Reflection** emerged as the most difficult challenge, requiring continuous self-analysis before making decisions. This challenge extends to teachers, demanding reflection based on the children they have in front of them. This process necessitates teachers' readiness and dedication of time to themselves. Lastly, **data collection** is considered a challenge in the inquiry process, as few schools undertake it due to resistance from teachers who fail to perceive its benefits. Participant 3 must persuade others about the importance of data collection for student development and educational planning.

Comparative Analysis

All three external PLC facilitators described similar challenges, but each emphasizes unique aspects in their respective cases. The common theme among all three is the challenge of **time**, identified as a crucial factor affecting the effectiveness of their efforts. Participant 1 mentioned the need for time and effort from teachers, Participant 2 stressed time pressure in managing school visits effectively, and Participant 3 highlighted the challenge of efficient time management for both teachers and the school.

Collaboration and support from colleagues and school leadership are recognized as significant success factors by all three Facilitators. Participant 1 emphasizes the necessity of colleagues' involvement and the difficulty in convincing others to participate actively. Participant 2 highlighted the importance of collaboration and coordination with teachers and school administration. Participant 3 mentioned the challenge of balancing different roles and the need for support from the school environment.

Reflection as an important process of PLC work poses another shared challenge. Participant 1 noted the difficulty of reflective practices and resistance to change, Participant 2 highlighted the challenge of involving children in the learning process and reflection, and Participant 3 identified reflection as the most difficult challenge, requiring continuous self-analysis.

Despite these commonalities, there are differences in the challenges mentioned by each facilitator, as well. Participant 1 discussed the **lack of external incentives** for teachers to participate in PLCs and the challenge of **ironic comments** and **resistance** from teachers for changes and participation in the

Skills/Characteristics of a Facilitator

According to Participant 1, a facilitator in the field of adult education requires a specific combination of skills and personality traits. Firstly, it is crucial to **avoid adopting an authoritarian approach** in teaching but to be open to interaction and collaboration with others. The **exchange of ideas** and **effective communication** are also fundamental characteristics. Furthermore, the facilitator must possess spe**cialized knowledge in the field of pedagogy**. Understanding the basic principles of pedagogy is essential for adapting teaching methods to the needs of adults. Specifically, knowledge of adult education principles and training methods is crucial, with an emphasis on the ability to provide visible and immediate results for learners. In addition, the facilitator needs to have excellent **communication skills**. The ability to listen and understand the needs of the learners is required, while effective communication is critical for knowledge transfer and guidance. Equally important is the **previous experience in the field of adult education**. Understanding the specificities of this process and the ability to adapt teaching approaches to adult needs are vital components of successful support. Additionally, the facilitator must have **administrative skills** for the effective organization of time and presentation of material. The ability to **manage resources and activities effectively** contributes to the promotion of effective education. Finally, **emotional intelligence** is a critical aspect. The ability to perceive and respond to the emotional needs of learners contributes to creating a positive learning environment.

According to Participant 2, an effective facilitator needs to be inspired by **flexibility** regarding the methods and tools used in PLC facilitation. Therefore, being knowledgeable about educational tools and methods is crucial. Flexibility is necessary because the school is a living organism, and unforeseen situations require adaptation. Subsequently, the facilitator must **maintain a low profile** and not adopt the role of an expert. On the contrary, they should **view teachers as collaborators**, encouraging them to realize that their cooperation is for mutual learning. **Building trust** is a crucial step, where the facilitator must **invest in human needs**, **listen to everyone's opinions**, and ensure that PLC actions respond to these needs. Additionally, the facilitator needs to develop a relationship with learners, **creating a bond** and **gaining their trust**. The facilitator must adopt the role of the "**critical friend**," **maintaining a balance between support and reflection**.

Participant 3 believes that the role of the facilitator should be performed as a **critical friend**, outside the group, trying to respect individual needs and promote collective goals. As they try to guide the group, it is necessary to be **familiar with various issues and assess the readiness level of the group**. A crucial element is adapting to the readiness of the group. The facilitator must understand that they are **not an expert in everything** and should not adopt the role of a "know-it-all." The attitude should be **collaborative**, seeking to **learn together with teachers** rather than imposing their knowledge. **Communication should be based on respectful and mutual exchange of ideas.** Furthermore, **building trust** within the group is critical. The facilitator must **invest in human needs**, **listen to everyone's opinions**, and ensure that their guidance aligns with the needs and ambitions of the group. Gaining the

trust of teachers as a person and adjusting their guidance to different needs creates an environment of collaboration and open communication.

Comparative Analysis

The three facilitators presented significant common characteristics and skills required for an effective PLC facilitator. A common element among all is the emphasis on communication and collaboration, recognizing the importance of exchanging ideas and effective communication.

In the field of pedagogy, Participant 1 highlighted the importance of **understanding pedagogical principles**, emphasizing the need to adapt teaching methods to the needs of adults. On the other hand, Participant 2 focused on **knowledge related to adult education** and training principles, placing importance on the ability to provide visible and immediate results. Participant 3 highlighted the need for **specific knowledge in the field of education**, thus creating a synthesis of pedagogy with scientific training.

Regarding **experience and flexibility**, all three external facilitators emphasized the importance of flexibility in their approach, acknowledging the need for adaptation to unforeseen situations. Participant 3 added the significance of **adapting to the readiness of the group,** emphasizing a collaborative approach.

An additional crucial characteristic that emerged is the importance of the facilitator's role as a "**critical friend**" in the learning process. Typically, the "critical friend" does not adopt an arbitrary or managerial role. Instead, they seek to encourage thought, facilitate discussion, and contribute to an atmosphere of open communication. In learning environments or professional contexts, the "critical friend" assists in achieving collective goals through collaboration, mutual reinforcement, and continuous learning.

Needs for Support and Training

Participant 1 reported that she receives **support from her supervisor** at the CPI. They have frequent discussions based on **journals** she compiles from her PLC visits, including **reflective texts** for each PLC. Additionally, she **collaborates closely with other colleagues**, attending educational seminars, and participating in PLC-related conferences.

Participant 2 also emphasized the importance of **collaboration with her supervisor** at the CPI. She also mentioned that she compiles **reflective journals** for each PLC visit. She also talked about the **ongoing discussions with their supervisor**, especially when issues arise. She also **collaborates with other facilitators**, involving discussions and exchanges of opinions. Participant 2 noted that, having worked with a particular colleague for ten years, they always share experiences, immediately after leaving a particular PLC meeting. She also mentioned her participation in CPD opportunities, occurring approximately 3-5 times a year, and her participation in PLC-related conferences for professional growth.

Participant 3 mentioned that facilitators at the CPI have been actively **involved in annual action research** for the past 10 years. During this process, the facilitators' team analyzes their needs and frequently meets for reflection. They collect data regarding the needs of each training session in the

PLCs, record reflective journals, and discuss them with their supervisor, who monitors the team's reflection process. Every year, they address issues that arise as the team's needs, conduct training sessions (3-4 annually), collect and read related research articles, and re-adjust and adapt tools they use in PLC meetings. They also **engage in action research** and **read material** related to teacher learning and educational change. Participant 3 emphasized that this process requires training and constitutes a continuous investment in professional development, which she considers highly important.

Comparative Analysis

The three facilitators are actively **involved themselves in a facilitators' PLC**, systematically enhancing their professional skills, **following a ddouble-deckerapproach**. They agree on the importance of **collaboration with their supervisor** at the CPI, gaining support and inspiration. Daily **reflective journals** form the basis for discussions, while close communication with their supervisor or fellow facilitators is often. Collaboration extends to colleagues, with the exchange of experiences and participation in seminars.

Moreover, CPD is a pillar for their evolution, conducting annual action research for needs analysis and creating reflective journals. Participant 3 emphasizes the continuous investment in professional development through training sessions (3-5 annually) and conference participation. Overall, they focus on collaboration, continuous education, and the creation of high-quality educational practices, enhancing the overall quality of education.

Support in an Online Environment

Participant 1 shared her experience as a support staff member in a team during the pandemic. It is important to note that this experience does not relate to the PLCs but to a different context. Specifically, during the pandemic, the team's collaboration flourished due to the intense need for digital materials, where providing digital tools formed the basis for supporting fellow teachers.

Participant 2 discussed the challenges she faced during the pandemic regarding meetings. Constraints on human contact and the need for online communication posed a challenge, and she encountered difficulties in promoting reflection and inquiry online. She acknowledges the difficulty of adapting to new technologies but recognizes the opportunity for growth that technology offers.

Participant 3 points out the contradiction between the need for distance education during the pandemic and the resistance of some teachers to it. She observed that some colleagues prefer in-person interactions and struggle with online trainings. Despite this difficulty, Participant 3 described the efforts she made to adapt and collaborate remotely, highlighting the importance of preparation and personal investment in new practices.

Comparative Analysis

The experiences shared by the participants that took place during the pandemic pose significant challenges. Participant 1 shared her experience regarding the team's collaboration during the pandemic, focusing on the **intense need for digital materials**. They faced the challenge of organizing and providing essential digital educational resources to fellow teachers. Participant 2 talked about **challenges related**

to online meetings and the need for online communication. Constraints on human contact and the need for **adaptation to new technologies** were evident. Facing these challenges, the participants highlighted the **need for flexibility**, adaptation, and collaboration in new educational practices during an exceptionally problematic period.

Reflection on the Previous Year

Participant 1 experienced success in supporting teachers during the previous school year. She actively engaged students in a large high school, executing a complex program that began with surveys and led to interviews with department heads. The positive response from students and the visible outcome of the initiative highlights the importance of active participation and fostering learning in a mature educational environment.

Participant 2 gained valuable insights from her journey in supporting teachers. Through her collective journey with various schools, the substantial significance of internal dialogue and the role it plays were highlighted. The increasing autonomy of teachers and the development of PLCs are bright steps in her career.

Participant 3 reported both positive and negative reflections over the past school year. On the one hand, she records the joy of PLCs that responded positively to her efforts, with increased visibility and autonomous operation. On the other hand, she faced the difficulties encountered by a PLC due to resistance from the administration and a lack of collaboration, failing to positively influence the educational culture in the school.