

Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP

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



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Leafap

Leading and Facilitating Professional Learning Communities in Schools towards an Inquiry-based and Reflective Practice
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Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP

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

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1 Introduction and Methods

This report presents the results from the experiences of facilitators (external to school) and leaders (internal to school) of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with varying roles and foci.

We selected both individual interviews and a focus group interview for various reasons. The individual interviews with two facilitators who are academics and one leader who was the head teacher of a school for many years were selected because they have an extensive experience in facilitating PLCs. Therefore, we wanted to give time for a detailed depiction of their experience and suggestions. The two academics have also worked with action research to support the PLCs and therefore it was important to look into their experience in detail in order to provide us with information about the support of inquiry and reflection in the PLCs, which is a main aim in the LEAFAP program. Two of the participants in the individual interviews (one facilitator and the leader) had also long experience in supporting democratic and inclusive practices in schools and this was also a pivotal criterion for their choice since LEAFAP is interested in attaining such knowledge regarding the support of PLCs.

We also conducted a focus group (FG) interview of three facilitators who are school advisors. School advisors are qualified teachers selected through a process by the Ministry of Education to support teachers' professional learning as external to school counsellors. They have recently by Law also acquired the role of teachers' evaluators. Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes.

Table 1. Participants in the interviews

Facilitators of PLCs	2 academics (P1, P2)	2 individual interviews
	3 school counsellors (FG1, FG2, FG3)	1 FG interview
Leader of PLC	1 head teacher L1	Individual interview

We followed the LEAFAP interview protocol designed for the needs of the programme and translated into Greek (please see separate file in Teams). Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then were analyzed to identify answers to our interview questions.

Below we separate our report to the role of facilitators and the role of leaders in supporting PLCs. Within the role of facilitators, when necessary, we make a distinction between academics and school counselors when describing the results of the interview analysis.

2 Facilitators

Experience as Facilitators

The two academics have almost thirty years of experience supporting PLCs (without calling them PLCs at that time) since their PhD studies which were relevant to psychology and pedagogy. PLCs of teachers, head teachers, student teachers and in-service teacher educators are included in the description of the two academics' experience. They have both worked with PLCs within an action research approach. The three school advisors have varying experience as supporters of teachers' professional learning and practice (FG1 10 years, FG2 5 years, and FG3 one year). They have all worked as facilitators on online PLCs and shared their experience and suggestions within the FG interview. We received varying descriptions of the facilitator's roles in PLCs which are connected to different actions and the necessity of specific steps to establish and support a PLC.

P1 explains the need for a systemic approach to intervene in a system, thus the first role is not to act as an external to the system facilitator, but to create relations and understand first of all the context you are going to support as a facilitator. P1 mentions a kind of ethnographic approach that facilitators should acquire to understand the culture of the context they are going to work with and create a common course with the people of that context, in order for facilitation of any novelty to be successful. P1 describes specific steps to achieve this facilitation:

- a) Understand the context and find "keys for understanding" the specific setting,
- b) build groups,
- c) specify needs, working conditions and teachers' difficulties through inquiry of participants' working conditions and difficulties but also onsite observations of the school's operation, staff meetings, school celebrations (in the case a facilitator observes things that the teachers do not discuss -for any reason- in their interviews),
- d) find ways of sharing experiences and discussing regularly (in face-to-face meetings or online),
- e) observe participants in action regularly,
- e) discuss the processes of support by being open, receptive and nonjudgmental to the participants' thoughts and ideas,
- f) ensure the keeping of systematic diaries by all to record difficulties, new knowledge and the 'history' of participants' work and sharing the diary entries through e-mails or online communication in a closed group,
- g) read the diary entries and enhance **reflection** of the PLC members by asking questions such as "Why something that you have planned did not happen?", "Why do you think this unexpected event occurred?",
- h) enhance a climate of trust. The gradual building of trust assists in enhancing in-depth reflection,
- i) organize frequent meetings and supporting group discussions in an attempt to bring to the surface the members' biographies, possible stereotypes and enhance experiential learning by working with the participants' stories (and not just providing knowledge and books to read),
- j) monitor the group processes and the individual psychological processing of each member,

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- k) select and co-operate with partners from the inside community that have a good knowledge of the community to support the group,
 - l) co-operate with scientists from out of school to establish an interdisciplinary approach,
 - m) is reflexive of his/her own practice as facilitator and continuously learn while enacting this role.

An important element for P1 is to be available and provide time for building these relationships and knowledge of the context. The facilitator is expected to read the diary entries and enhance reflection of the PLC members by asking questions such as the ones mentioned in point h above. The gradual building of trust is reported to assist in enhancing in-depth reflection.

Overall, facilitator's actions are presented by P1 to be characterized by a systemic and systematic approach. Investing time, inventiveness, creativity, reflective processing of experience and 'not being afraid to say that I have done this wrong', learning by doing, thus learning by monitoring the course of the PLC, are all processes that need to distinguish the facilitator's actions. A facilitator should assist PLC members, and not only explore and reflect upon their practice collaboratively but also to theorize their practice in order to understand it better and, subsequently, plan ahead and move on to next steps.

P2 has also worked within action research to support PLCs. P2 describes as main role of the facilitator to enhance teachers' critical thinking by posing them critical reflective questions of "why and how" that will assist them in rethinking their observations and revisit their understandings to foster further discussions. In addition, encouraging teachers to read literature will assist them in their reflections.

The role of facilitating inquiry and reflection is important according to P2. Facilitator should suggest research tools and, therefore, PLC members could choose among them or shape them accordingly. The facilitator should initiate an action research process (i.e. peer observation) that assists to activate all members and bring in elements for reflection. Reflection occurs mainly when the facilitator poses questions but also through teachers' answers to these questions that help in evolving the reflection collaboratively through dialogue.

The facilitator encourages participants to keep reflective reports during the intervention with open questions (i.e. how do you describe the matter that is important for you? what do you find difficult / unpleasant in that? what do you see changing? (i.e. threefold interval: beginning, middle of the year, end). The roles described in the FG interview show some commonalities with the ones described above such as:

- to explore participants' needs and organize groups of teachers based on the common issue they think is important for school improvement
- suggest involvement in action research project on a voluntary basis
- assist in the creation of research tools – each group of teachers designs different tools according to the issue they chose (questionnaire, interview, observation) and the facilitator gives feedback for their improvement
- assist participants in the analysis of data and making inferences
- assist in the design of specific actions based on inquiry
- study the research tools, analysis, action plans of teachers, and find appropriate methods for supporting reflection and action
- encourage participation in the community.

FG also mentioned:

- the study of theoretical contexts of the selected issues and their appropriate use to support teachers
- giving feedback to teachers' ideas, actions
- uploading materials to assist teachers' work
- the need to collaborate with a member of the community that will assist in the co-ordination of the exchange of ideas and practices within the community.

The role of the participants in a PLC

Regarding the role of the participants in a PLC, P1 refers to their systematic reflection of their experience through inquiry, thus members of the PLC record in their diaries their actions and their effects. Specifically, information included in the diaries concern the context (i.e. who participated and how), how the planning of activities was implemented (what they did, what they changed from their planning, how and why) as well as anything they would like to document. Participants in a PLC then share their diary entries with others for further discussion of commonalities and differences in experience.

P2 and FG1 agree with the role of teachers as researchers and reflective practitioners in a PLC and thus emphasize the inquiry and reflection roles as well as the collaboration among them through communication, sharing, and exchanging of ideas.

FG2 and FG3 describe participants role as exchanging views and ideas and sharing their (good) practices within the community.

Factors influencing the effectiveness of facilitator's actions

There are several factors influencing the effectiveness of facilitator's actions: Structural factors concerning the culture of collaboration which is usually lacking both in society and schools, and the lack of time and resources' provision for the creation of PLCs on an institutional level.

Facilitator's abilities such as the ability to build a community and members' sense in belonging to a community along with relevant feelings, and the ability to work with the group dynamics as well as support each member individually are also perceived as important.

An important factor is the time availability of the facilitator because a lot of time is needed to build relationships, acquire a knowledge of the context, and support differentiated needs and issues. Three facilitators give emphasis on the amount of extra time and workload required to support a PLC effectively because of the time needed to study participants' reports, suggestions and questions, and prepare for their systematic reflection.

Facilitators' practices also affect the effectiveness of PLC facilitation. Taking into account the PLC members' knowledge and perspectives and the establishment of an "equal" rather than a top-down relationship is very important. Exploring and reflecting on your own role as a facilitator is also significant for an effective support of the PLC.

Facilitation is also discussed to be dependent upon the members of the group since they share different personal theories, understandings, and practices as well as different needs that they may face.

A school counselor also reports on the difficulty of having a dual role as a counselor and evaluator of teachers' work, both creating teachers' hesitance to trust their difficulties and seek support from the school counselors.

Last, teachers' insecurity regarding their knowledge and professional identity or hesitation to share their thoughts and actions with others are mentioned as obstacles to their active participation that do not allow a PLC to develop.

Criteria and methods for evaluating the effectiveness of facilitation and impact

P1 refers to the use of questionnaires and focus group interviews as methods to evaluate the effectiveness of facilitation and impact of PLCs.

P2 refers to the importance not only to change teachers' practices but also their way of thinking. P2 proposes sound recording of meetings and comparison of the progress and change of the issues and ways of discussion by facilitator and teachers themselves.

FG mention that they use questionnaires and oral discussions at the end of the co-operation with teachers to check the participants' satisfaction and the benefits they received from their participation in the PLC. One school counselor also mentioned the use of a questionnaire prior and after the participation in the PL to see differences in knowledge and abilities gained.

Challenges

P1 refers as basic challenges:

- the lack of a culture of co-operation in the Greek educational context and the fact that since educators do not have experiences of collaboration during their work, they have not been convinced about its value for learning and, therefore, they are less willing to participate in a PLC. P1 also mentions PLC members' drop outs from the community in the course of collaboration because members are not convinced about its value for themselves or want to work on a routine and processing basis.
- the centralized educational administration both at the national level and at the school level along with the derived lack of flexibility and openness are not supporting efforts to bring in novelties to school.
- the lack of appreciation of such work with teachers and schools in the academic field and the consequent attention it gives to relevant publications having as an effect the rewarding of individual rather collaborative works. The challenge is therefore to become resilient in people underestimating such work in the academia.
- participants' stereotypes when working with a community of teacher educators or student teachers that aim at the educational integration of minorities or refugees. Thus, it is important to unravel the stereotypes of those who are going to support teachers and pupils in integration practices and discuss them.

References to other challenges mentioned by different participants in the interviews also entail the enactment of the facilitators' role and specifically:

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- sustaining an essential role rather than a processing role as a facilitator based on genuine interest, openness and an exploratory and reflective stance on his/her practice that feeds further his/her own learning as a facilitator.
 - keeping a balance between supporting / guiding and enhancing bottom-up processes by which teachers are encouraged to express their perspectives, ideas and proposals
 - activating every member through inquiry and reflection
 - resisting an “expert” role often asked by teachers in order to receive specific solutions for their difficulties
 - working with participants’ different personal theories and different support needs that make the PLC a differentiated group of people. Suggestions regarding this challenge refer to finding commonalities based on the wish to make a change and utilize this as something that brings the group together.
 - establishing equal membership in the PLC, avoiding imposition of beliefs and practices by some members and convincing that all can and need to receive criticism.

Challenges also refer to the role of teachers as researchers and reflective practitioners since action research is a demanding process and needs to be conducted taking into account the time members have to invest on it. In addition, participants may show resistance to anything new as well as to a critical approach to their work. In the FG interview challenges mentioned include:

FG1:

The heavy workload for the facilitator a) to study teachers’ mails, proposals, action plans and respond reflectively to them to guide future actions due to the required continuous steps and cycles of action research b) to respond to the varying issues that different groups of teachers were working on and, c) to respond to the different needs.

FG2:

- the reflection based on the interactions among teachers was not successful – the emphasis was on my role as the one of giving feedback to their action plans
- varying level of digital skills that did not allow all to participate in the same way in the digital learning community- Facilitator supported gradual knowledge of digital skills
- to keep participants’ interest alive
- to foster participation and dialogue in a digital platform
- to find a good platform that enables the work of PLCs

FG3:

- Teachers are hesitant to exchange opinions in the community.
- Some are more active than others.
- Gaining trust from teachers because of the evaluator’s role.
- Practical difficulty in having an in-depth scientific knowledge about the issues that concern teachers.

Competences and characteristics of a good facilitator

P1 noted as important the active listening and open mindedness of the facilitator to avoid pre-determined decisions and allow facilitators' continuous learning based on their interaction with the group. The communicative abilities of the facilitators are also mentioned, meaning that they should be able to enhance communication among the members of the PLC and act as model of this communication. In addition, being inventive to support collaboration among PLC members despite the difficulties and being resilient as a facilitator to the vanity or ineffectiveness of actions to support a change in the system.

P1 also noted as important the need to accept that as a facilitator you also learn from the community and also to establish a collaborative and equal rather than a top-down approach to a PLC.

P2 mentioned facilitator's persistence to promote the goals of the PLC since time is needed to develop a PLC, but also patience to listen to teachers and not hurry to the next step. Ability to keep the focus on the discussions, keeping a balance between guidance and flexibility so as to enhance a bottom-up approach to PLCs.

Knowledge and experience in PLCs are also perceived as important. Specifically, readings in action research and reflection and critical consciousness of their role and the processes that encourage professional learning and educational change are essential. In addition, the knowledge of educational research (and not necessarily of action research) in order to avoid teachers recycling their concerns and providing tools for inquiry is also important. Experience about how to foster reflection and give feedback to the members of the PLC is crucial for enhancing effectively its course.

FG1 participant also verifies the importance of competencies related to organizing a reflective framework for the PLC, thus to know by which questions the facilitator can strengthen the dialogue and the interactions among his/her group to encourage critical thinking of their work and decisions.

FG 2 good knowledge of subject which gives you a recognition by the group

- Inspiring teachers and providing the incentive for their participation in a PLC
- Empowering their ability to express and communicate with others
- Respecting participants' views
- Tolerance towards different views
- Flexibility

FG3 to provide motives for participation and dialogue

Need for specific support/training

Participant 1 stated her lived experience as a member of an interdisciplinary group of scientists designing interventions for migrants during her Ph.D. Studies made her understand the power of working in groups bound by a commitment to a goal and adopting a perspective of collaborative action research. Also her studies in psychology assisted her to work with groups and facilitate the dynamics of a professional group. She believes that a genuine facilitation process is based on the continuous learning

of the facilitators based on the inquiry and reflection upon their practice. Thus, she does not think you learn how to be a facilitator by reading a book about it or following guidelines how to facilitate.

P2 has not received prior training and support before becoming a facilitator of a PLC. Preparation for the facilitations was achieved only by reading books and articles and looking at descriptions of how others facilitated groups of teachers.

P2 Proposes as part of the training:

- the development of a toolkit with indicative research tools for various issues (questionnaires for pupils or interviews with parents)
- a forum for dialogue so as to upload easily and share thoughts, ideas, questions and practices
- a training in the use of forum, how to read forum entries, to analyze them and support reflection as well as on how to support dialogue in a forum
- a training about reflection - how to reflect upon data from inquiry, how to deepen teachers' reflection

FG1 received training through her Ph.D studies in action research as a theory and practice for teachers' improvement. FG2 received training through her practice as an in-service teacher educator in one programme that fostered PLCs and in one programme that she was asked to educate teachers in PLCs based on materials designed by a pedagogical institute. FG3 has read about action research but has not received a focused training neither has she used it in practice.

Their suggestions for training and resources include:

- how to develop questions for teachers' reflection
- how to support digital PLCs
- how to encourage dialogue among the group
- how to gradually build communication
- how to enhance interactions among teachers and how to structure these interactions within the PLC
- digital tools and platforms that facilitate the creation and support of a PLC
- a short guide with practical guidelines how to support a PLC

Facilitating teachers' groups in an online environment

FG participants reported that they used online platforms during the pandemic to communicate with the teachers but also used online platforms for meetings when participants of the PLC came from different places and it was easier to meet. Some of the tools they refer to is the use of viber for easy communication and Webex platform for online meetings, use of the Panhellenic School Network for teachers to upload good practices, use of padlet to upload the results of their educational programmes. 2 FG participants were not satisfied with the interactions/collaboration of teachers through these platforms.

P1 has not extensive experience and P2 no experience in facilitating online PLCs. P1 has also online tools and social media groups for easier communication.

Expectations about school leaders

P1 mentioned the role of someone from the school (and not necessarily the head teacher) as a mediator to provide the “insider” knowledge and perspective and help the facilitator understand the context.

P2 referred to the role of head teacher (leader) as someone expected to initiate the PLC.

FG3 also described her collaboration with a teacher who is a member of the PLC as an insider of the community that will encourage members’ participation and be the key person to communicate more easily.

3 School leaders

Experiences as PLC leaders

The interviewee (L1) was a head teacher in a school with the majority of children having a migrant / refugee background and systematic efforts are made to foster democratic and inclusive practices.

The role of the leader

L1 described the role of the head teacher as a coordinator of the school as a PLC in the following ways:

- To take into account the working context in order for a PLC to be successful
- To construct a community with teachers, pupils, parents, and the local community in order to be successful
- To detect the various issues as they occur in the everydayness of the school
- To create a common framework with the teachers about the pedagogical principles of the school (e.g. to respect pupils' and families' cultures and civilization, to engage parents and the wider community in the school's context, to utilize some pedagogical methods).
- To analytically observe the starting point from which each teacher participates in the school as a community, to explore the prior experiences of teachers in other schools, to detect possible contradictions or disagreements
- To utilize every teachers' expertise and potential and avoid a uniform image of how a teacher should think and act while, at the same time, make an effort to agree on some common pedagogical principles
- To create a climate of trust and security based on the right of everyone to express a different opinion
- To take into account these different starting points and perspectives in shaping the community
- To discuss all matters in pedagogical meetings and establish a common concern for every issue that individual teachers bring in the meetings
- To develop an agreement about the need for extra time as well as organize afternoon meeting from time to time to have ample time for discussions in the group
- To convince teachers that dialogue and collaboration in meetings are the solution to the problems the school and each one faces
- To continuously support teachers both on an individual and collective level regarding their difficulties
- To co-operate closer with a core group of teachers with a bigger amount of experience in the school because of their knowledge of the school's policy and history
- To invest time for observation of what goes on in school as well as dialogue and support with the teachers
- To self-monitor the selected actions initiated by the leader but also explore the perspectives of teachers, pupils and parents on the course of actions

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- To encourage a culture of inquiry as part of the pedagogical identity of the school by teachers having the role of researchers, the school sharing the research results with pupils and parents, the school being open to young or experienced researchers coming in and studying the school practice.
 - To request help from different sources and (academics, psychologists, sociologists, institutes, educational organizations) that act as 'critical' friends to the leader but also cooperate with the teachers for the design and implementation of interventions for the benefit of the school.

A very interesting perspective about the role of inquiry in PLCs is presented since inquiry is not only related to the enactment of a research role as leader of the PLC or to teachers as researchers but in the transformation of the school as a research center (teachers encouraged to inquire into their work, present their work as speakers at the University or conferences and publish their work).

Factors affecting the role of the leader

The following factors were mentioned to influence the actions of the leader:

- The big number of teachers in the school together with the fact that a big number of teachers (who are responsible for the teaching of special subjects such as physical education teachers, information technology teachers, music teachers and so on) that do not have a full-time working relationship with the school and teach in different schools
- The lack of a permanent staff in the school
- The fact that creating, supporting and sustaining a PLC is a complex process
- The time needed to build a climate of trust and shared agreements about the school policy and educational practices

Evaluation methods

L1 refers to teachers documenting everyday practice through various ways (i.e. children making movies, children's texts and drawings etc.)

Challenges

L1 refers in the interview that there are many challenges in the building up and support of a PLC. These challenges are described below:

- Teachers have their own personal theories, ideologies, experiences and it is a challenge to find a common ground
- Sometime disputes and contradictions intensify among the members the PLC
- The responsibility you have especially when teachers trust in you and count on your support
- To have resources (e.g. good library) and a space for teachers to work together

Competences and characteristics of a good PLC leader

L1 identifies the following as important competencies and characteristics of leaders:

- To take his/her role seriously since it affects people's lives
- Persistence and patience to build a community of practice
- Great respect to the limitations each teacher has
- To utilize the resources of each teacher and the dynamic each one brings to the school
- Readiness and sensitivity to explore the school context and the potential of each teachers
- To be calm when facing the challenges and when disputes and contradictions occur
- To be flexible and negotiate the expectations from every teacher
- To have both the theoretical knowledge to support a PLC but also an inquiry stance observing the everyday life of the school
- To be available to discuss with everyone and give time for dialogue as an important action of leaders to

Need for specific support/training

The head teacher received no prior training and intuitively at the beginning supported the PLC. Close observation and research into the function of the school as well as continuous observation of the course of the PLC development were prerequisites for being aware and designing appropriate actions for the support of the PLC.

Leading online PLCs

Communication and collaboration through online meetings during the pandemic are said to be chosen only because they were mandatory. They are described only as supporting communication and collaboration during these conditions but also as inferior to face to face meetings.

Leaders' expectations about external facilitators

A very positive experience gained from collaboration with academics, psychologists, sociologists, institutes, and educational organizations. L1 refers to academics, psychologists and sociologists acting as critical friends that were called upon to support the school's work.

Universities are presented to have a crucial role in studying and learning the everydayness of school in the context of specific conditions but also help develop new designs and possibilities that the school can adopt. At the same time the leader encouraged teachers to present their work in in-service education seminars, give lectures to the Universities during courses and present their work in academic conferences and/or publish it in journals. P1 has not extensive experience and P2 no experience in facilitating online PLCs. P1 has also online tools and social media groups for easier communication.