

Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP

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



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

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1 Student teachers focus group report

Introduction

Two Focus Groups (FGs) were conducted: one of six and another of four female students aged 21-23 years. They were all enrolled in the Double Degree of Primary Education and English Studies at the University of Málaga (Spain), with the exception of one, enrolled in the Degree in Primary Education. They were interviewed during a nine-week 18 ECTS school placement at a primary school in their last year of a five-year degree. During their internship, student teachers are present at the school for the entire duration of the school timetable, and a mentor teacher (a regular teacher at the school) is assigned to them. Additionally, as part of the course component, they attend to 4-6 seminars with a university tutor, where practice-related issues and their own professional development are discussed. During the semester when school placement occurred, the students were enrolled in a total of 60 ECTS credits, equivalent to a full university year at an ordinary degree level.

In conjunction with the PLC meetings, which typically took place online every two weeks, the student teachers conducted their own individual Action Plans, where they set their professional development goals considering their internship experiences. They were instructed to share their progress with their Action Plans, offer feedback to one another, and pose reflective questions. This approach aimed to encourage deeper reflection on issues related to the development of teachers' professional competences.

Except for one participant in one of the FGs, all the others were well acquainted; they had been part of the same class group for four years before starting their internship period, had previously collaborated in student teams, and felt very comfortable and confident working with each other. The 'new' student, however, stated that she had felt welcome and emotionally supported from the first day, and comfortable enough to expose her concerns and contribute to the group on an equal footing.

Based on the students' voluntary reflections in their mandatory assignments, comprising a Portfolio and an Internship Journal, where they shared their experiences participating in a Professional Learning Community (PLCs) of student teachers without any prompting, it is evident that this professional development format was satisfactory for them. PLCs were seen as emotional support, spaces where reflection about school and professional development was stimulated, and where they could learn teaching and management strategies. The only problem they associated with their experiences in PLCs was the fact that PLC meetings were an extra workload and, as students of a double degree with university lessons in the evenings, together with their placement at schools until 14:00, they felt overloaded and overburdened and struggled to find a time slot in which all members of their PLC were available.

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams on December 14, 2023, and they were video- and audio-recorded after the participants had signed an informed consent.

Experiences as PLC meeting leaders

In both FGs, the role of the leader (moderator) was played in turns. In one of the FGs (coinciding with the six-member PLC), the participants insisted on the leader's role in adhering to a structured format during

the meeting (the students had been provided with a model structure they could follow or modify), managing the time so that they could cover the meeting stages and focus on the issues they planned to discuss. The other group, which had been participating in a four-member PLC, insisted on the role of the leader in taking care of the documentation side of the PLC, as she was responsible for taking the meeting minutes. Members of the two FGs also mentioned the leader's role in organizing communication (giving the floor and ensuring that all members had the opportunity to talk). Two of the participants in different FGs also mentioned the role of the leader in fostering reflections and deeper analysis by the members through questions (the students were given model questions to ask, aiming to challenge their peers and encourage deeper thinking on the discussed topics), particularly at the first meetings, until they all internalized the rationale behind the PLCs and there was less need for encouragement to reflect.

Regarding the contribution of the meeting leaders to their fellow students' learning, participants mentioned that they had the impression that all members contributed to it, although when they assumed the role of the leader, they were more aware of their responsibility in asking reflection-oriented questions.

According to the participants in their focus groups, the impact of their roles was more noticeable in the initial meetings. As they all became familiar with the dynamics and purpose of PLC meetings, this role became less significant in ensuring the meeting's effectiveness. Concerning the members' contributions to the PLC sessions, they all acknowledged that everyone contributed to the discussions in their own way, reflecting their individual personalities. They recognized that certain individuals in the group were more talkative than others were. In instances where someone appeared less participative, the leaders ensured that this was not due to a lack of opportunity to intervene in the discussion.

Challenges

The participants in the FGs did not encounter any challenges in their role as meeting leaders beyond the initial 'understanding' stage. They highlighted that the model structure of the sessions provided by university tutors and outlining the role of the meeting leader in each session phase played a significant role in helping them grasp and understand their responsibilities in this capacity.

As mentioned before, as PLC meeting leaders, they used questions to encourage reflection and deeper analyses of the topics under discussion by the members. They were unaware that they had fostered inquiry as leaders. Inquiry occurred as part of the individual members' Action Plan, but it was not intentionally fostered by the meeting leader.

Every member actively participated in the meetings willingly, and there was no need to encourage or prompt any member to do so. Decisions within the group, such as meeting dates or topics to be discussed, were made democratically through discussion and consensus.

Competences and characteristics of a good PLC leader

The participants in the FGs identified several competences and characteristics of a 'good' PLC meeting leader. These included the ability to establish a meeting structure and manage time effectively, ensuring that all stages were covered and that all members had opportunities to contribute and comment on their Action Plans and other members' Action Plans and concerns. Additionally, being proactive, being a good listener, publicly acknowledging the value of the PLC members' contributions to the discussion

and being able to summarize well to document the meeting were highlighted as important qualities. Another important quality is the leader's requirement to possess strong communication skills. This includes the ability to ask members reflective questions, address potential issues assertively and tactfully, and effectively handle situations.

The interview participants acknowledged that having a meeting leader contributed to keeping the meeting on track, following a meeting structure, facilitating communication among the members and their equal participation, and encouraging deeper reflections.

Need for specific support/training

The students interviewed mentioned only two experiences in their prior university education that could be indirectly linked to their preparation as PLC meeting leaders. In one module, participants were instructed and practiced how to moderate a round table. Additionally, some students received information on various groupwork roles, such as spokesperson and secretary roles. However, they missed training in how to communicate within the group and how to collaborate effectively within a group. They also mentioned that they felt that they learned how to function in group work through practical experience and actively participated in student groups.

They expressed that it would be valuable to receive training in leading student teams, especially during the first university year, provided by experts in this field and as part of their university education.

Leading meetings in an online environment

The interviewed students conducted their PLC meetings online using Google Meet and found that this platform effectively met their needs. They seemed to feel comfortable working as a group in the online environment. However, they acknowledged that meetings in person could have facilitated more natural communication and enhanced the coherence of the group. Considering the members' limited availability due to the heavy workload imposed by their university studies, they all agreed that the advantages of meeting online significantly outweighed the drawbacks and that without the possibility of meeting online, they could not have been able to participate in PLCs. They could not discern any difference between meetings in person and meetings online in terms of the level of reflective discussion achieved during the meetings. However, they acknowledged that communicating in an online environment is more challenging, particularly in terms of turn-taking. The meeting leader needs to be attentive to giving participants the floor and respecting their turns to speak while also participating in the discussion. In this regard, the PLC of six members appeared to be more aware of this challenge than the PLC composed of four members.

Expectations about the PLC meeting leader

What the interview participants expect from the PLC meeting leader coincides with the roles assumed by them in the student teacher PLCs: Be able to structure meetings, listen attentively, publicly acknowledge the value of each member's contributions to the discussion, ensure the inclusivity of all members, and facilitate reflection.

Further notes concerning the student teachers' experience of collaborating in PLCs

Despite the relatively brief duration of the school placement (nine weeks), the student teachers engaged in PLCs worked effectively and regarded the experience as both interesting and valuable for their professional learning. We understand that one key factor in the success of the professional collaboration experience among these student teachers is the fact that they began their PLC collaboration already well acquainted with each other, having previously collaborated in group work, and having a good relationship with each other. The background situation had an impact on leadership in that meeting leaders did not feel inhibited when posing reflective questions to their fellow students. Additionally, from the very beginning, all members felt safe and confident in expressing their concerns and points of view. This underscores the need to establish an emotionally safe environment for PLC to be successful.

2 School leaders focus group report

Introduction

Three focus groups (FG) were conducted between January 11th and 18th, 2024, each lasting approximately one and a half to two hours. Participants provided informed consent before the interviews, which were audio-recorded.

The composition of the three FGs was as follows:

- Group A: Five Primary Education head teachers, all members of a Professional Learning Community (PLC).
- Group B: Five mentor head teachers, comprising three from Primary Education and two from Secondary Education.
- Group C: Four Primary Education heads of study.

The FGs were facilitated by a professor from the University of Malaga and the head of the Málaga In-Service Teachers Training Center. Group A participants are part of a pioneering PLC working group in Malaga, initiated in 2017-18 and continuing in subsequent years. Their focus is on unifying common actions, improving practices, and fostering teaching-learning processes and a positive working atmosphere. Group B consists of experienced head teachers adopting a mentoring profile to provide professional competencies for managerial functions, promoting participation, and facilitating decision-making. Group C was established in 2018-19 to establish common action guidelines among heads of study, aimed at improving intervention in teaching bodies through sharing managerial practices.

Experiences as PLC meeting leaders

The interviewed leaders from the three groups emphasized that the role of a leader should act as a catalyst for change and improvement in pedagogical practice. They highlighted peer work and learning among education professionals as effective ways to enhance educational processes. Leaders and facilitators were recognized as crucial knowledge managers and energizers within their educational communities.

In Group A, leaders mentioned that the initiative to adopt this approach originated in 2017-18 when some members participated in the HeadsUP project, where they observed and managed teams as professional learning communities in other countries. They appreciated the positive aspects of this methodology and have since grown and consolidated their group. This experience not only fostered empathy but also provided a broader perspective, enabling them to adapt practices from other teams to their own educational community.

Groups B and C emphasized that all members had prior experience in management teams. They highlighted the importance of leadership in reaching a wider audience within the educational community, a crucial aspect for project development where inclusivity is essential. Another perspective was provided by those who attained leadership through certification courses, considered intermediate leaders. However, they stressed the importance of connecting collaborative cooperation with learning and professional development.

Leaders across all groups emphasized the importance of developing common objectives that reflect the aspirations of their educational community through commitment and collaboration. They emphasized the need for a theoretical framework and support strategies to achieve effective leadership and energize groups. Providing support and feedback to facilitate professional and personal development, cultivating an enriching and proactive educational environment, promoting a culture of shared learning, building supportive relationships, and leading by example were identified as crucial leadership practices.

Challenges

The interviewed leader groups unanimously agreed on the challenge of managing their educational community, given the diversity of personalities and needs, sometimes accompanied by resistance to change. Leaders must possess the competence to recognize and value these differences, fostering an inclusive environment where all members feel valued and capable of contributing fully. Effective communication skills are essential for maintaining a positive and productive work environment, especially in managing potential conflicts arising from differences in opinions.

Identifying and developing individual talent is crucial for both personal growth and collective success. However, obstacles such as time constraints, resource limitations, or a lack of appropriate support structures may hinder this process. Therefore, leaders must proactively identify and nurture the talents within their teams, providing opportunities for development that benefit the school community as a whole.

Group A emphasized the importance of listening to and recognizing that all teachers are part of the solution rather than imposing decisions. Similarly, Group B highlighted the necessity of establishing clear objectives that allow for a range of compatible possibilities while addressing team concerns. Group C identified challenges in space and time management. Finding productive collaboration dynamics, balancing individual needs with collective objectives, and achieving tangible results are ongoing challenges. Leaders must navigate group dynamics effectively, demonstrate flexibility in leadership, and be willing to adapt their approaches as needed.

Another fundamental factor in overcoming these challenges is the stability of the school staff. Schools with a high percentage of permanent staff members can more easily ensure continuity in their work. Some schools pursue stability by becoming officially recognized "learning communities," which allows them to have a greater proportion of permanent staff.

Competences and characteristics of a good PLC leader

To lead effectively, a school leader needs competences and a personality that enable them to guide, inspire, and support their teams to achieve common goals. In this regard, some competencies and characteristics include the following.

- **Communication skills:** Effective communication skills for clear expression, active listening, and facilitating constructive dialogue.
- **Collaboration and coordination:** Ability to link coordination with collaborative work among teachers, emphasizing ongoing learning, interaction, and respect.
- **Trust building:** Building trust in the team by ensuring information comes from the group, reinforcing well-done work, and showing rigor in identifying areas for improvement.

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- Conflict and problem management: Skills in conflict and problem management to handle disagreements and tensions effectively, promoting solutions that respect individual differences and strengthen group cohesion.
 - Critical thinking: Critical thinking skills to analyze complex situations, identify underlying problems, and develop innovative solutions.
 - Encouraging innovation: Encouraging innovation and research among faculty members.
 - Adaptive leadership: Adaptive leadership skills to adjust leadership style according to the changing needs of the team and the environment, adopting different roles as necessary to guide the group towards its goals.
 - Development and mentoring: Development and mentoring abilities, providing constructive feedback, guidance, and development opportunities for team members.
 - Empathy: Empathy for understanding and sharing the feelings of others, creating an atmosphere of trust and support.
 - Information management: Knowing how to manage information, both for the faculty and their families.
 - Flexibility and openness to change: Flexibility and openness to change, adapting to new ideas or approaches.
 - Integrity and ethics: Integrity and ethics to convince through examples, inspiring confidence and respect within the team.
 - Initiative and proactivity: Initiative and proactivity to act preemptively in the face of opportunities and challenges.
 - Resilience: Resilience to face adversities, overcome obstacles, and recover from failures; fostering a positive learning environment.
 - Strategic vision: Strategic vision to visualize the desired future and chart a clear path to achieve it in the short, medium, and long terms, guiding the team.

Need for specific support/training

The effectiveness of a leader is enhanced by the continuous support and training of team members. Ongoing training is essential to keeping educators updated with the latest research, educational theories, and teaching methodologies. Professional development and support programs should be designed to address leaders' specific needs. This support should include:

- Ongoing professional development: Continuous training to keep educators updated with the latest research, educational theories, and teaching methodologies tailored to leaders' specific needs.
- Institutional and resource support: Backing from school administration and educational governing bodies to provide necessary resources, including financial support and access to educational technologies and suitable physical spaces for collaboration.
- Introduction of innovative teaching methodologies: Implementation of innovative teaching methodologies to enhance the teaching-learning process.
- Familiarization with digital tools: Training in digital tools and online platforms to enrich teaching-learning processes and facilitate remote collaboration.

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- Leadership skills development: Development of leadership skills, including effective team management, conflict resolution, and motivation strategies.
 - Effective assessment techniques: Training in effective assessment techniques to monitor progress and identify areas for continuous improvement.
 - Establishment of support networks: Creation of support networks to exchange knowledge, experiences, and best practices among leaders.
 - Implementation of evaluation and feedback systems: Implementation of evaluation and feedback systems to reflect on leadership performance and activities, providing constructive feedback both internally and externally.
 - Emotional support and well-being: Provision of emotional support and resources for leaders' well-being to ensure a healthy work environment.

Leading/Facilitating/Advising in a virtual environment

Interviewees unanimously agree that in the current educational landscape, where technology plays an increasingly significant role, leadership in virtual environments has become essential. Leaders must update their skills to effectively lead, facilitate, and advise in virtual settings.

To succeed in this realm, leaders must:

- Acquire familiarity with digital tools and platforms for online communication, collaboration, and video conferencing.
- Employ strategies to encourage active participation, such as online brainstorming sessions, group work, and forum discussions, while ensuring clear communication norms and equal opportunity for all members to contribute.
- Proactively build remote relationships by organizing virtual informal meetings, "get-to-know-you" sessions, and online team-building activities to foster a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

Other considerations highlighted by interviewees include:

- Effective time management in virtual environments, guiding members in setting clear objectives, prioritizing tasks, and providing technical support and training opportunities.
- Online assessment and feedback mechanisms to facilitate quick adjustments and adaptation of strategies to meet group needs.
- Promotion of digital well-being by encouraging a healthy balance between work and personal lives, given the potential for screen exhaustion and difficulty in separating work time from personal time.
- Adaptation of leadership, facilitation, and advisory approaches to suit the particularities of digital communication and collaboration.

Leaders' expectations about external facilitators

School leaders expect that external facilitators foster a collaborative environment conducive to mutual learning and professional development. Additionally, leaders expect external facilitators to have a thorough understanding of the school's improvement needs and characteristics, enabling them to provide targeted support in areas relevant to both the school and its staff.

3 Facilitators focus group report

Introduction

Five focus groups interviews were conducted and a total of 20 in-service teacher educators (13 female and seven male) took part in the study. Among these five groups, two comprised novice teacher educators (those with less than a year in office), while the remaining three consisted of teacher educators with a minimum of two years in office (and a maximum of 16). These teacher educators, former experienced teachers, are employed in official institutions (Centros del Profesorado [CEP]) responsible for the professional development of in-service schoolteachers within the jurisdiction of the regional educational administration. The focus groups consisted of between four and seven participants. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants belonged to the Centros del Profesorado de Málaga and Marbella-Coín.

The participants cited several reasons for applying for the position of CEP advisors (asesores), with the most common motivations being the desire for fresh professional challenges and educational experiences, a keen interest in the work of CEP advisors and teacher education, and the preference for a workplace close to home. Overall, they expressed high job satisfaction. Additionally, it is worth noting that CEP advisors have the option to return to a schoolteacher position if they choose to do so.

Experiences as facilitators

All participants possess experience in advising teacher groups in two modalities of collegial professional development officially endorsed by their educational authority: workgroups and in-school initiatives. Workgroups involve teachers choosing a specific topic (e.g., ICT, Universal Design for Learning, bilingual education, mathematics teaching/learning) and may involve teachers from one or multiple schools. In contrast, in-school initiatives engage at least half of the teaching staff in addressing areas identified for improvement based on evaluations from the previous school year. These initiatives are usually initiated by the school management team and are a response to the requirement of implementing improvement measures on a yearly basis. These measures aim to target areas in student learning that require enhancement, identified through evaluations of academic results conducted at the end of the previous school year. In-service development includes expert-led sessions on relevant topics, which are sometimes conducted by a member of the teaching staff. Involvement in professional development offers participants the chance to transfer to another school and receive a slight salary increase. Consequently, not all teachers engaged in development activities necessarily have a genuine interest in professional growth.

All FG participants firmly believe that teachers' professional growth rely heavily on collaborative efforts. While part of their responsibilities involves encouraging teachers to pursue individual professional development activities, such as free online and in-presence courses organized by the education authority, these facilitators acknowledge that collaborative work among teachers directly addresses their most pressing interests and needs. Additionally, such collaboration fosters networks that offer emotional support and facilitate the implementation of innovative ideas encouraging the willingness to take risks. In this sense, collaboration within the school enables teachers who may be

hesitant to step out of their comfort zones to engage with and learn from more innovative practices. Furthermore, in the context of in-school development, if the expert addressing the educational issue under focus is a member of the school staff, they are readily accessible for advice or clarification. This facilitates more relevant and immediate support. It is acknowledged that such collaboration yields the greatest impact on school and learning outcomes, especially when teachers within the same school collaborate.

Facilitating teachers' professional collaboration is primarily perceived as a process of professional 'accompaniment', a term widely used in the Spanish discourse and literature on teacher professional development but challenging to translate into a term in English. It is closely associated to 'counseling', 'mentoring', 'support', and 'coaching', and it refers here to a process in which one person, in this case, the teacher educator, actively listens and guides a group of teachers to develop their professional competences, engage in reflective thinking about their practice, and ultimately transform their teaching. The participants in the study see themselves as promoters of reflective practice, evaluative processes, and educational change. Unlike teachers, who are often overwhelmed with teaching and administrative responsibilities, facilitators emphasized that they have more time to structure and guide reflective processes utilizing various methods such as group dynamics and reflective questioning. They assist teacher groups in pinpointing their development needs and determining the focus of the development initiative. Sometimes, they use coaching techniques like the GROW technique to facilitate the process of setting clear objectives. They offer guidance in defining goals (in terms of SMART goals) and devising strategies to achieve them. Afterward, facilitators aim to help teachers with what they often find most challenging: translating what they have learned into classroom practices. Additionally, they encourage teachers to share practices that have been effective for them and provide them with references (books, articles, webpages) on the development focus. Moreover, they provide emotional support by acknowledging and praising their work and effort to reflect on and transform their practice. Another important role involves sharing examples of successful practices relevant to the chosen area of development. Additionally, facilitators establish networks among groups of teachers and schools to share these practices and among groups of teachers who pursue similar developmental objectives. Additionally, they serve as facilitators for the bureaucratic tasks associated with the formal recognition of the teacher group as a self-development initiative and with the design of the development proposal according to official guidelines. Curiously enough, the teacher educators with more experience saw themselves less as facilitators for the bureaucratic tasks than the novel ones and better able to guide teacher groups to identify areas in need of development and how to address them and facilitate reflective processes.

Facilitators note that, initially, their interaction with teacher groups tends to be more informative, but over time, they develop a stronger rapport with the group. They also acknowledge that they have closer contact with the group coordinator (the group leader) compared to individual teachers, primarily because of the facilitators' multiple commitments and resulting time constraints.

Facilitators emphasize the importance of being readily available for consultation through both formal and informal channels. They establish tutoring hours at the CEP where they can be reached via phone or in-person visits. Additionally, they make themselves accessible via email, phone calls, and WhatsApp.

In addition, they analyze the school context and (i) anticipate developmental needs that schools are likely to experience based on their facilitation experience, and (ii) with their outside perspective, they can identify not only weaknesses but also strengths that they can use as levers for further development. Schools may not yet be aware of these needs, weaknesses, or strengths due to being overwhelmed with urgent matters.

When discussing factors affecting their effectiveness in their role, facilitators mention time as a significant constraint. They feel that not having enough time to closely accompany and support the groups with ongoing visits, discussion with group members, etc. inevitably leads to less effective facilitation of collaboration among teachers. The motivation behind teachers' participation, whether genuine professional improvement or other reasons, also impacts the facilitators' role in promoting collaboration and reflection among teachers. Facilitators face the additional challenge of engaging those teachers who participate for reasons unrelated to their professional growth and helping them recognize the importance and relevance of professional learning to improve collaboration with their colleagues and student learning. A comprehensive understanding of the school, coupled with the management team's openness about their needs and concerns, also plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of advisors' role in facilitating collaboration among teachers. This knowledge enables advisors to align their suggestions for areas of collaboration among teachers with the school's needs and areas requiring improvement more easily. Furthermore, the efficacy of facilitators' job is influenced by their ability to cultivate a close, supportive, and non-judgmental relationship with the teacher group members, along with effective communication skills. Additionally, being trained in facilitation strategies to become competent facilitators is mentioned as another key factor.

When it comes to expectations from teachers engaging in collaborative work, facilitators emphasize the importance of teachers personally recognizing the need for professional development in the area of collaboration and voluntarily and genuinely participating in it.

They observe that transformation processes occur when they analyze the products created by teachers (such as learning situations, materials, dynamics), when teacher groups seek their advice, and when they are invited to participate in activities, lessons or group meetings. However, no formal evaluation of their impact is conducted, and they express uncertainty about how such evaluation could be carried out.

Facilitators generally regard collaboration among teachers in teacher groups positively, except when teachers participate for reasons unrelated to professional development. Evaluation of collaboration typically occurs during the final session shared by facilitators and group members, where processes and achievements are discussed. Additionally, in smaller workgroups, professional growth is easier to identify due to the smaller number of participants.

As suggestions for improving collaboration among teachers that facilitators mention the need for a platform where teachers could have access to information on existing or past collaborative initiatives, establishing networks of teachers working on the same topics and providing them with strategies and digital tools to promote collaboration and instructing them on their use. They mention the recently created Blog provincial de experiencias educativas de éxito (Provincial Blog of Successful Educational Experiences) to disseminate good educational practices. Furthermore, they identify the following strategies as successful in enhancing collaboration: utilizing group dynamics, establishing networking

groups of teachers with similar goals, and promoting ownership and commitment to the collaborative effort.

Challenges

Facilitators identify a shortage of time as the primary challenge when advising and supporting teacher groups. With heavy administrative burdens, they struggle to find time to meet with teachers, hold discussions, and encourage them to share their experiences in group settings. This restricts their interactions primarily to the group coordinator in the case of workgroups and with members of the school management team in the case of in-school development initiatives, rather than engaging directly with individual group members. They consider personal, direct contact essential for effectively facilitating collaborative work processes. Consequently, assessing the true impact of this collaborative work becomes challenging. To use their time constructively, some facilitators prioritize allocating their time to newer groups or those they perceive as needing the most guidance. The increasing administrative workload assigned to teachers also impacts them, leaving teachers with limited energy and time to dedicate to collective discussions, reflection, and collaborative work.

Another challenge arises from teachers who participate in teacher development initiatives solely to reap the associated benefits, without genuine interest in their own professional growth. Facilitators must persuade them of the value of engaging in their professional development for the sake of the student learning.

Another challenge is understanding the specific needs and characteristics of the group or school they are advising on professional development issues. If the facilitators are new to the group or school, or if teachers in the group or manager teams do not openly share their concerns, providing relevant support becomes challenging. On a personal level, facilitators emphasize the importance of teachers feeling supported and understood, rather than judged; additionally, they recognize the significance of possessing strong communication skills to effectively engage with the group, listen actively, provide clear instructions, and offer advice.

Another challenge emerges when school management teams, who are leading the initiative, are unable to engage and sensitize teachers to concentrate their collaborative efforts on the designated area or when the group coordinator lacks the ability to energize and mobilize the group effectively. This lack of ownership by the teachers can hinder facilitators from effectively promoting collective work processes. Furthermore, the management team, in an effort to avoid burdening teachers with additional responsibilities, may fail to allocate time and space for meetings with facilitators and among themselves, which in turn undermines the impact of this collaborative work.

In cases where the number of teachers in the group is large, such as in in-school development initiatives, facilitators encounter challenges in advising the group coordinator, a school leader, on how to engage everyone and foster their commitment to professional development and collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing areas of improvement within the school.

Another challenge arises regarding the curricular area or topic chosen by teachers for their collaborative work. Facilitators may not be specialists in the specific discipline or topic chosen by the teachers, requiring them to consult with other CEP advisors and seek relevant information and resources, and facilitating networking with groups of schools with relevant good practices. However,

they recognize that their support is most effective when they are knowledgeable in the curricular area requiring assistance.

Another challenge arises from the perception that teachers may view them as inspectors who assess their work rather than as advisors and facilitators.

A further difficulty refers to how to assess the impact of collaboration among teachers on individual professional growth in an in-school development initiative where as many as forty teachers can participate.

Facilitators believe that teachers' workload and insufficient competence in reflective skills hinder their ability to engage in reflection, posing a challenge for facilitators as well. They also acknowledge that some teachers may be hesitant to engage in reflective practices. To promote reflection, facilitators primarily pose reflective questions to the group, either in written or oral form, regarding the collaboration process and its impact. However, they express the need for more time to directly interact with group members and engage in reflective dialogue with them. This year, CEP Málaga has introduced a new strategy to promote reflective practice. Coordinators of in-school development initiatives are required to engage with reflective questions and tasks on a Moodle platform. These activities are designed to train them in the process of reflective practice, aiming to dispel the notion that in-school development solely relies on expert-led sessions. Instead, the goal is to encourage reflective and action-oriented processes both before and after expert-led sessions. This strategy is currently undergoing pilot testing. Moreover, facilitators advise these coordinators to divide the teaching staff into smaller groups, allowing each group to concentrate on a specific aspect of their improvement strategy.

Facilitators note that teacher groups often fail to gather evidence of student learning in initiatives resulting from collaborative work. When assessing their collaboration, they typically rely on qualitative indicators collected through a questionnaire, as well as impressionistic information.

According to the facilitators in the FGs, democratic processes are easier to implement when the teacher group is relatively small, as is typically the case with workgroups. However, in larger groups, such as in-school development initiatives, the coordinator often assumes most of the responsibility and decision-making leadership. Facilitators consider that they may facilitate democratic processes in a selected sample of groups that they could closely monitor, but they consider it impossible to do so in all the groups under their supervision. The facilitators also agree that there is sometimes a lack of consideration and planning regarding how the group will collaborate effectively. Additionally, they note that groups often lack the necessary skills to conduct productive meetings.

Competences and characteristics of a good facilitator

Facilitators acknowledge the importance of having excellent communication skills to actively involve the group, give clear guidance, and provide advice. The focus group participants identified being a good listener, being a good pedagogical leader, having expertise in the topic addressed by the teacher group and in good practices, effective time management skills, and a clear vision for the group's developmental path as key competencies of an effective facilitator. Furthermore, familiarity with digital collaboration tools, understanding of how the specific school operates and strategies for fostering transformation in school processes, as well as the ability to ensure commitment from the groups, were also mentioned. In terms of characteristics, they mention being approachable, kind, extroverted, giving the impression of always being available, and being present when needed.

Need for specific support/training

It is emphasized that facilitator-training initiatives should include firsthand experience of reflective dialogue. This enables facilitators to understand and practice it themselves before transferring the skill to their interactions with teacher groups. Furthermore, they emphasize the necessity of being trained in strategies and dynamics to promote reflective practices.

Additionally, facilitators highlight certain competencies essential for effective facilitation, which they identify as areas where they need support or training. These include communication skills to actively engage the group, provide clear guidance, offer advice, and actively listen; effective time management skills; proficiency in digital collaboration tools; and the ability to ensure commitment from the groups.

When asked about who they would like to conduct the training, the FG facilitators mention experts from various fields, not only those within education but also from other professional backgrounds. They are fully supportive of participating in training activities aimed at enhancing their ability to facilitate and support teacher groups.

Facilitating teachers' groups in an online environment

All facilitators in the FG had experience in supporting teachers' groups online. In their opinion, the online modality diminishes closeness with the teaching staff and the school management teams. Based on their experience, facilitators may convince hesitant management teams to involve the school in collective developmental initiatives through personal, face-to-face interactions, which would be impossible to achieve online.

For facilitating teachers' groups online, facilitators emphasize the need for relatively short meetings, a clear understanding and planning of what needs to be conveyed, and active listening skills. They recognize that maintaining attention during online meetings is challenging and suggest employing various attention-gathering strategies (such as facilitating that the group members can share and interact during the meeting). They believe that online facilitation is more suitable for smaller groups and that the facilitator must be competent in planning sessions meticulously, adhering to the planned schedule, actively listening, dedicating (at least part of) the meeting to ensuring participants achieve a relevant outcome, and finishing the meeting with some objective(s) for the next meeting.

Expectations about school leader

The facilitators in the FGs expect school leaders to be genuine pedagogical leaders who not only promote collaboration and collegial professional development among their staff but also effectively communicate the importance of these initiatives to the teachers. Additionally, they explicitly mention that some expectations are common for both facilitators and internal school leaders: possessing good listening skills, being approachable to gather concerns and teachers' development needs, being able to engage staff in collective development initiatives, and assuming distributed leadership among the staff.

Overall, the facilitators interviewed expressed satisfaction with their relationships with both school leaders and workgroup leaders. Some even describe this aspect of their role as one of the most fulfilling functions as CEP advisors. Regarding school leaders, facilitators emphasize the importance of them

setting an example for the teaching staff in terms of attitudes and behaviors related to personal relations, attendance at development activities organized as part of in-school collective development initiatives, and attention to reflective processes as a fundamental part of professional learning.