Erasmus+ Project LeaFaP

International Report on PLC Leaders' and Facilitators' Experiences, Practices, Challenges and Needs

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LeaFaP

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

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Content

1 Introduction

One of the commitments of the LeaFaP project was to develop a consolidated international report on the facilitation and leadership practices within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)/communities of practice (CoP). The information in this report, drawn from empirical practice, will be used in conjunction with a thorough literature review conducted earlier to establish the foundations for the project's efforts to develop a substantiated learning program for leading and facilitating PLCs.

It is important to note that, in the LeaFaP project, a leader is considered an internal participant within the PLC/CoP, while a facilitator is an external individual who supports the creation and sustainability of the PLC/CoP from outside the group.

While this report incorporates key insights from reports originating in Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Norway, and Spain, we acknowledge that certain context-specific details may be absent. To address this, we have ensured that readers can access the national reports directly on the LeaFap project website (https://www.leafap.eu/). This report is designed with the understanding that readers can supplement their understanding by consulting these national reports.

2 Methods

This report was originally intended to draw from focus group (FG) interviews with educational staff and student teachers who have experience in leading or facilitating professionally oriented groups, exploring their needs, practices and challenges. In addition to FGs, some partners opted to conduct individual interviews to provide detailed accounts of the experiences gained by expert facilitators and/or leaders.

An interview protocol based on a list of relevant topic areas (Annex A) was developed collaboratively by members of the LeaFaP project. It underwent multiple rounds of editing and refinement through subsequent reviews until a definitive protocol was agreed upon by consensus. The interview protocol was translated into the national languages of the project. The protocol also underwent some adaptations to adapt to the three groups being interviewed: student teachers, school leaders and external facilitators.

FG and individual interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently thematically analyzed according to the topics outlined in the interview protocol. Participation in the FG and individual interviews was voluntary. If required by the

university, participants in both FGs and individual interviews signed an informed consent form (Annex B). When necessary, this form was also translated into the national language. In any case, all participants in the FGs and individual interviews gave their consent, either in written or oral form, to be interviewed and recorded.

3 Findings from FGs and individual interviews with PLC/CoP facilitators

Characterization

A total of 37 facilitators participated in the FGs or individual interviews conducted by the LeaFaP members in Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, and Spain. Their experiences varied greatly, ranging from nearly 30 years of facilitation, as observed with the facilitators interviewed by the team from Greece, to just one year, as observed in interviews conducted in Greece and Spain. Additionally, they worked with diverse types of teacher groups and educational levels. For instance, facilitators supported primary and secondary education schools, kindergarten schools, and vocational high schools in Cyprus and Spain. In Spain, facilitators also supported groups of teachers from the same school or a mix of schools and educational levels.

PLC/CoP facilitator's roles and responsibilities

The respondents mentioned various roles and responsibilities they undertake as PLC/CoP facilitators. The most frequently mentioned categories include:

- **managerial roles**, focused on establishing the necessary material conditions for the PLC/CoP meetings to occur and continue (such as schedules, rooms, etc.), on documenting the meetings and informing the members;
- **context knowledge-related roles**, aimed to understand and gain relevant insights into the school or broader educational context, as well as professional development needs, and to align school expectations or improvement needs with teachers' professional learning focus within the PLC/CoP;
- **learning- and knowledge-building roles**, intended to advance teachers' pedagogical learning and knowledge, including on the notion of PLC, and assist in enhancing their practice (e.g., by supporting the identification of the teachers' learning needs and the formulation of their action plan or learning program), and in theorizing their practice;

- **community-building roles**, intended to foster collaboration, strengthen bonds, build trust, encourage openness, and facilitate group interactions, thereby creating a crucial environment for teacher learning;
- **communication-facilitating roles**, directed at enhancing and optimizing communication effectiveness, and openness within the group to ensure active participation of all members in the discussion and free expression of their needs and concerns;
- **feedback-provision roles**, related to providing constructive and timely feedback on teachers' ideas and actions; and
- **reflection- and inquiry-enhancement roles**, associated with fostering occasions for both individual and collective reflection, as well as supporting research into teachers' practice by aiding in the development of research tools, data analysis, and deriving implications for practice.

PLC/CoP facilitator effectiveness: Key influencing factors

The following factors are the most often referred to in the national reports:

Time constraints
- Insufficient time for close support and ongoing discussions; time is required for building relationships, understanding the context, and addressing diverse needs.
- The provision of effective support to PLCs/CoPs increases the workload of already overburdened facilitators.
- Shortage of time and resources allotted by the education system and schools for teacher collaboration.

Competence to be a facilitator
- Training in facilitation strategies such as the ability to build community and foster a sense of belonging among members or competence in managing group dynamics and providing individual support.
- Ability to build community and foster a sense of belonging.
- Competence in managing group dynamics and providing individual support.

Relationship-building
- Establishment of close, supportive, and non-judgmental relationships with the PLC/CoP members.

Communication skills
- Effective communication for facilitating collaboration.

Teacher motivation
- Teachers' genuine desire for professional improvement.
- Insufficient incentives for teachers to engage in collaboration.

Teacher insecurity
- Insecurity regarding professional knowledge and identity.
- Hesitancy to share thoughts and actions in PLC/CoP meetings.

Engagement of participants
- Involvement of teachers with varied motivations (facilitators must address the challenge of involving teachers who participate for reasons unrelated to professional growth, emphasizing the importance of professional learning for collaboration and enhanced student outcomes).

Understanding of the school context
- A comprehensive grasp of the school context.
- Openness and collaboration from the school management team, in alignment with the spirit of PLCs/CoPs.

Personality traits
- Being a good listener.
- Being kind and pleasant with the group

Evaluation of the impact of a facilitator within a PLC/CoP

The following methods, data types and criteria have been used by the facilitators being interviewed to assess facilitation effectiveness and PLC impact:

Data collection methods
- Oral discussions with teachers
- Pre- and post-participation questionnaires
- Questionnaires and focus group interviews
- Sound recordings of PLC/CoP meetings
- Observation of improvement in educational practices
- Continuous communication and informal assessment within the PLC
- Observation of the evolution of PLC members' reflective practices and engagement
- Gathering documentation on new initiatives and changes in practice by teachers
- Observation of classroom practices (when voluntarily being invited by the teachers)

Data types
- Feedback from PLC/CoP members
- Student questionnaire data on the impact of teachers' new skills
- Classroom observation data
- Documentation of innovations implemented by teachers
- Meeting discussions and individual interventions

Criteria for assessment
- Satisfaction and benefits from PLC participation
- Differences in knowledge and abilities gained, including those concerning the provision and reception of feedback.
- Improvement in educational practices
- Impact of new skills acquired by teachers
- Evolution of reflective practices and engagement within the PLC

It needs to be mentioned that the facilitators in Spain manifest that no formal evaluation of their contribution is conducted by the CoPs they support.

Challenges faced by the PLC/CoP facilitators

Challenges commonly mentioned in the national reports regarding the facilitation of teachers' PLCs/CoPs include:

Time constraints and time management
- Facilitating reflective processes, in-depth discussions and pedagogically-sound practices at schools demands a significant time investment.
- The handling of heavy administrative tasks by facilitators reduces the time they can devote to facilitating PLCs/CoPs.
- Prioritizing time allocation for newer or needier groups.
- Limited direct engagement with individual members affecting the impact of the PLC/CoP on individual professional development.
- Insufficient time allocated for teacher collaboration by schools and the overall education system (teachers' workload and availability of time affect engagement in reflection and participating in PLCs/CoPs demands considerable time and effort from teachers).

Cultural and institutional challenges
- Lack of a collaborative and reflective culture among teachers.
- Teachers' resistance to change and preference for routines.

- Centralized education system not supporting innovation.
- Academic system valuing individual merits over collaborative work.
- Teachers find it challenging to engage deeply in reflection due to their daily professional tasks.
- Engagement of school leaders in the promotion of PLCs among the teaching staff.
- Insufficient support, involvement, and collaboration from school headteachers.

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions
- Teachers' perception of facilitators as inspectors rather than advisors.
- Teachers' background conceptions and value systems when they clash with the value system supported by the PLC/CoP
- The discrepancy between teachers' expectations of PLCs and the actual concept, affecting their understanding of the facilitator's role.

Group dynamics and engagement
- Balancing support and guidance while fostering bottom-up processes, where teachers feel empowered to express their ideas and concerns.
- Addressing individual needs within the PLC/CoP and promoting differentiated support.
- Encouraging teachers' genuine professional growth over seeking benefits.
- Encouraging teachers to reflect and inquiry.
- Keeping the interest of the group members in the PLC/CoP work.
- Ensuring equal membership in the PLC/CoP, avoiding the imposition of beliefs and practices, and persuading all members that they can receive criticism.

Facilitator role and expertise
- Avoiding an "expert" role when teachers seek specific solutions for their challenges while providing advice and accompanying the PLC/CoP.
- Understanding group needs and challenges in open communication.
- Lack of expertise in specific topics or in-depth scientific knowledge relevant to teachers' concerns.
- Adaptation to the expectations of the school.

Facilitators' and teachers' competences
- Facilitators' lack of effective communication skills for engagement and support.
- Assessing the impact of collaboration on professional growth.
- Teachers' lack of competence in gathering evidence or collecting data on student learning from collaborative initiatives.

- Lack of necessary meeting skills and planning in groups among facilitators and PLC/CoP moderators.

Group size and dynamics

- Challenges posed by large group sizes in engagement, reflection, and coordination.
- Fostering democratic processes within a PLC/CoP is easier in smaller groups but challenging in larger ones.

Technical and online challenges

- Handling online PLC/CoP work effectively.
- Identifying suitable online platforms.
- Addressing varying levels of digital competence among teachers.
- Encouraging PLC/CoP members' participation, engagement, and reflection in an online format.

In the context of facilitating student teachers' PLCs, the following dimensions challenges are noted:

Role conflict management

- Addressing conflicts arising from dual roles (facilitator and examiner). This may lead student teachers to attend the sessions more during the facilitator's personal visits to PLC meetings.

Implementing PLC characteristics

- Clarifying the role of external facilitators in the context of pre-service teacher education.
- Ensuring adherence to PLC principles and practices.

Building relationships

- Balancing professional distance with establishing rapport with student teachers.
- Fostering a supportive environment while maintaining professionalism.

Facilitator expectation management

- Addressing facilitators' personal expectations and biases.
- Ensuring acceptance of participants' chosen topics.
- Managing facilitators' expectations regarding topic discussion depth and choice.
- Preventing negative impacts of facilitator expectations on PLC dynamics.

Participant engagement

- Actively involving participants in the PLC process.
- Encouraging active participation and contribution.

Effectiveness monitoring
- Monitoring and evaluating the actual effectiveness of the PLC strategy.
- Implementing measures to enhance effectiveness based on assessment results.

Time management
- Dealing with time constraints and limited availability of facilitators.
- Creating effective time slots and schedules to accommodate participants' needs and visits to PLC meetings.

Promoting PLC benefits
- Encouraging student teachers to recognize the advantages of PLCs.
- Highlighting the potential benefits of investing time and effort in participating in a student teacher PLC.

Competences and characteristics of a 'good' PLC/CoP facilitator

According to the facilitators' view, the following categories encapsulate the various abilities and qualities expected of a competent PLC/CoP facilitator.

Facilitation approach

- Avoidance of an authoritarian attitude
- Avoidance of an expert role and promotion of mutual learning between the facilitator and the community.
- Adoption of the role of a "critical friend" to maintain a balance between support and reflection.
- Maintaining focus in discussions and balancing guidance with flexibility.
- Alignment with the group's needs and aspirations.

Interpersonal skills
- Active listening to everyone's opinions and concerns.
- Respectful and tolerant of different views.
- Emotional intelligence to respond to others' needs and to create a positive environment.

Communication skills
- Competencies in organizing a reflective framework, and asking questions to strengthen dialogue and critical thinking.
- Communicative abilities to enhance and model open, respectful, and equitable communication within the PLC/CoP.

Knowledge and expertise

- Knowledge and experience in PLCs, including action research, reflection, and educational research.
- Specialized knowledge in pedagogy and andragogy.
- Specialized pedagogical content knowledge.
- Previous experience in the field of adult education.

Organizational and leadership skills
- Competence in organizational skills to manage time, resources, and activities effectively.

Promotion of active participation and equity
- Promotion of a collaborative, trusting, and equitable approach.
- Ability to inspire teachers and incentivize their participation.
- Ability to empower teachers to express and communicate effectively.

Resilience
- Persistence and patience in developing the PLC, listening to teachers, and taking gradual steps.
- Capacity to endure and persevere through adversities.
- Creativity to support collaboration when confronted with obstacles

Flexibility and adaptability
- Open-mindedness to respond to the concerns of the PLC/CoP members and schools.
- Flexibility regarding methods and tools to facilitate PLCs/CoP.

Need for specific support/training for PLCs/CoPs facilitators

Needs of facilitators of face-to-face PLCs/CoPs

The facilitators interviewed exhibited varying levels of preparedness for their role. However, the majority either lacked formal training or only received basic training for their role of facilitating PLCs/CoPs. These categories encompass a comprehensive range of areas requiring support and training for facilitators to effectively facilitate PLCs/CoPs according to their views.

Research skills
- Identification, collection and analysis of teacher and student learning data
- Development and use of questionnaires and interview guides
- Use and analysis of reflective journals

Reflection techniques

- Effective reflection techniques including how to reflect upon data from inquiry
- Strategies to deepen teachers' reflection skills
- Strategies to enhance reflective interactions among teachers and structuring these interactions within the PLC

Communication skills
- Formulating questions aimed at stimulating teachers' reflections
- Strategies for fostering meaningful and learning-oriented discussions

Community building
- Gradually building effective and learning-oriented communication, openness, and trust within the PLC

In the context of online or hybrid PLCs/CoPs, the following areas of support/training are identified:

Digital support and tool selection and use
- Familiarity with digital tools and platforms that facilitate the creation and support of a digital or hybrid PLC/CoP
- Supporting PLCs/CoPs in a digital format
- Training in forum usage for promoting reflective dialogue and sharing of ideas and educational practices
- Forum management skills for analysis and reflection support

Regarding methods for facilitating training for PLC/CoP, the following are outlined by the interviewed facilitators:
- Attending educational seminars or courses, preferably led by facilitator with significant and proven experience in facilitating PLC/CoP
- Participating in PLC/CoP-related conferences
- Ongoing discussions with supervisors
- Collaboration with other facilitators for discussions and exchanges of opinions, and for sharing experiences
- Participation in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities
- Engagement in action research
- Reading material related to PLC/CoP, teacher learning, and educational change
- Being provided with research toolkits for various PLC/CoP-related purposes

Needs of facilitators of online PLCs/CoPs

The interviewed facilitators have a range of experiences in facilitating PLCs/CoPs online. However, the majority have primarily utilized online tools for either fully online or hybrid facilitation approaches. Facilitators commonly note that they began conducting PLC/CoP

facilitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. They agree that face-to-face encounters are more effective in fostering engagement and building emotional bonds. According to them, these are areas where support and training in online facilitation activities are needed:

Promotion of reflection and inquiry: Facilitators highlight difficulties in promoting reflection and inquiry online.

Meeting structure and planning: Facilitators emphasize the importance of clear understanding and planning of meeting agendas.

Attention management: Facilitators recognize the challenge of maintaining attention during online meetings and suggest employing various attention-gathering strategies.

Competency in facilitation: Facilitators stress the importance of facilitators being competent in planning sessions meticulously, adhering to schedules, actively listening, and ensuring relevant outcomes for the PLC/CoP members.

Group size: Facilitators suggest that online facilitation is more suitable for smaller groups.

Objective setting: Facilitators emphasize the importance of finishing meetings with clear objectives for the next session.

Facilitators' expectations of school leaders

The facilitators' expectations of school leaders, derived from both focus group (FG) discussions and individual interviews, lead to the following conclusions:

- Facilitators expect school leaders to be genuine pedagogical leaders, promoting collaboration and professional growth among staff.
- Effective communication from school leaders about the importance of collaboration initiatives is emphasized.
- School leaders are expected to set an example for teaching staff in attitudes and behaviors related to personal relations, participation in development activities, and attention to reflective processes.
- Overall expectations include possessing good listening skills, being approachable to address concerns and development needs of teachers, engaging staff in collective development efforts, and promoting distributed leadership among the staff.

- In general, facilitators are satisfied with their relationships with school leaders and workgroup coordinators, although some mention insufficient support.

4 Findings from FGs and individual interviews with PLC/CoP leaders

Characterization

A total of 27 school and faculty leaders participated in the FGs or individual interviews conducted by the LeaFaP members in Austria, Greece, Norway, and Spain. Though their experiences differed, the majority had considerable experience as school or faculty leaders. Additionally, they worked with diverse types of teacher groups and educational levels, from pre-primary through to university level.

PLC/CoP leader's roles and responsibilities

The respondents mentioned a variety of roles and responsibilities they undertake when serving as PLC/CoP leaders. It is important to noted that the list below encompasses roles that assume school leaders and roles that assume faculty staff when they act as leaders of teacher groups, without distinguishing between the two types of leaders. Additionally, the reference to teachers may also include student teachers in the case where leaders act in the context of pre-service education.

Contextual awareness
- Acknowledging the context as crucial for the success of PLCs/CoP.
- Proactively identifying and addressing the specific areas in need of school improvement through evaluation.
- Aligning the needs for professional development to the areas in need of improvement at the school.

Catalyst for change and improvement
- Driving innovation and progress in pedagogical practices.
- Motivating teachers to embrace and design innovative practices.

Community building
- Highlighting the importance of fostering collaboration and learning among teaching staff.
- Building a community involving teachers, students, parents, and the local community to foster success.

- Cultivating a climate of trust and safety within the group to encourage open communication and collaboration.
- Ensuring that all matters are discussed in pedagogical meetings, with a common concern for issues brought by individual teachers.
- Ensuring that all members can participate in discussions and decision-making processes.

Framework establishment
- Agreeing on a common and shared framework with teachers regarding pedagogical principles, including cultural respect, parental engagement, and utilizing effective pedagogical methods.

Utilization and recognition of individual teacher's expertise
- Leveraging the expertise and potential of every teacher.
- Considering different starting points and perspectives in shaping the community and encouraging mutual support among teachers.
- Cooperating closely with a core group of experienced teachers to benefit from their knowledge of the school and school context.

Time and space management
- Allocating spaces and time for discussion and collaboration among teachers.
- Ensuring that meetings are structured, and time is used effectively to facilitate productive discussions and actions.

Continuous support
- Providing ongoing support to teachers, both individually and collectively, in addressing their difficulties.
- Ensuring effective implementation of the agreed-upon action plan.

Reflection and inquiry
- Fostering reflection and reflective dialogue.
- Proposing action plans to facilitate continuous improvement.
- Encouraging a culture of inquiry by involving teachers as researchers, sharing research results with stakeholders, and welcoming external researchers to study school practices.
- Soliciting teachers to identify learning points and reflect on successes and areas for improvement
- Discussing future actions
- Engaging in meta-conversations about communication within the group
- Stimulating teachers to explore their theories of action
- Encouraging teachers to document progress through data evidence

Seeking external assistance

- Requesting assistance from various sources, such as academics and educational organizations, for designing and implementing interventions for the school's benefit.

Access to scientific literature and development opportunities

- Providing members with access to scientific literature and principles relevant to their practice to support their learning and development based on a scientific basis.
- Ensuring relevant continuous professional development opportunities to cater for the teachers' needs.

PLC/CoP leader effectiveness: Key influencing factors

The following factors impacting the effectiveness of a leader in PLC/CoP are mentioned in the national reports:

Professional competence as a leader

- Commitment to their role.
- Joint development of common objectives that reflect the aspirations of their educational community through participation and collaboration.
- Competence in leadership skills: effective team management, evaluation methods, conflict resolution, and motivation strategies.
- Participation in support networks for knowledge exchange and best practices sharing among leaders.

Institutional support and resources

- Backing from school administration and educational governing bodies, providing necessary resources.
- Possibilities to provide teachers with CPD to keep them updated with the latest research, educational theories, and teaching methodologies tailored to their specific needs and the needs of the school.
- Large number of teachers, including those with part-time roles across multiple schools, affecting cohesion and collaboration.
- Lack of permanent staff in the school, potentially leading to instability and inconsistency.
- Suitable premises

- Time resources to collaborate and build trust and shared agreements on school policy and educational practices.

Teaching methodologies
- Introduction and promotion of innovative teaching methodologies to enhance the teaching-learning process.

Assessment
- Implementation of evaluation and feedback systems for reflection and improvement.
- Training in effective assessment techniques for monitoring progress and continuous improvement.

Emotional support
- Provision of emotional support and resources for leaders' well-being to ensure a healthy work environment.

Teachers' dispositions
- Individual teachers' motivation to reflect and collaborate, personal animosities, and skills and competencies.

Challenges faced by the PLC/CoP leaders

Challenges commonly mentioned in the national reports regarding the leadership of teachers' PLCs/CoPs include:

Role in the PLC/CoP and hierarchical positions within the school
- Maintaining open dialogue
- Uncertainty about being perceived as an equal or formal leader, leading to difficulty in assessing whether progress is genuine or merely a facade in the presence of a hierarchical superior
- Concerns about participants' honesty versus desire to please the leader

Diversity management
- Managing the diversity of personalities and needs, including teachers' resistance to change.
- Identifying and developing individual talent.
- Recognizing and valuing teachers' expertise areas, strengths, weaknesses, and overall differences to foster inclusivity and support among teachers.
- Documenting the individual progress of each member
- Assisting individual teachers to find realistic actions/areas for improvement

- Misconceptions regarding the nature of a PLC
- Irregular attendance to meetings due to other commitments
- Incorporation of new members into the PLC/CoP

Constructive communication

- Effective communication to maintain a positive and productive work environment.
- Listening to and recognizing all teachers as part of the solution.
- Ensuring that everybody actively participates and contributes to the meetings.
- Asking the right questions that enable insight/development in a tactful way.

Available resources

- Overcoming obstacles such as time constraints, resource limitations, or lack of support structures.
- Challenges in scheduling appointments and organizing rooms.

Emotional challenges

- Creating a climate of trust.
- Ensuring that everyone feels valued.
- Managing conflicts and contradictions among members.

Leadership approach

- Establishing clear objectives while addressing team concerns.
- Navigating group dynamics effectively and demonstrating flexibility in leadership.
- Ensuring consistent attendance to meetings.
- Ensuring implementation of action plans.
- Actively involving all participants in meetings.
- Providing scientific answers.
- Developing the group to function autonomously.
- Finding common ground among teachers with differing personal theories and conceptions.
- Tailoring questions and feedback based on the group's experience and maturity levels in PLC work.

Fostering reflection and inquiry

- Difficulties in promoting inquiry and reflection among teachers.
- Challenges in focusing on science-oriented development and evidence-based practices due to time constraints and lack of value placed on it in schools.

Competences and characteristics of a 'good' PLC/CoP leader

According to the leaders' view, the following categories encapsulate the various abilities and qualities expected of a competent PLC/CoP leader:

Knowledge base
- About the school
- About the school system
- About models, dynamics, etc. concerning PLC/CoP work

Communication skills
- Clear expression
- Active listening
- Constructive dialogue
- Ability to ask constructive questions

Emotional competences
- Creating an atmosphere of trust and support
- Understanding the feelings of others
- Recognizing and reinforcing teachers' exemplary work and potential
- Fostering a positive learning environment
- Availability to dialogue and discuss with the group and with individuals
- Respecting the teachers' limitations
- Have professional confidence and build that confidence in others

Conflict and problem management
- Handling disagreements and tensions effectively
- Promoting solutions respecting individual differences
- Strengthening group cohesion

Critical thinking
- Analyzing complex situations
- Identifying underlying problems
- Identifying areas for improvement diligently

Openness and readiness to change
- Fostering innovation among members
- Developing innovative solutions

Adaptive leadership
- Ability to work in a team
- Adjusting leadership style according to changing group needs and environment
- Adopting different roles as necessary

- Adapting to new ideas or approaches
- Having both theoretical knowledge to support a PLC and adopting an inquiry stance by observing the everyday life of the school

Development and mentoring
- Providing constructive feedback
- Offering guidance and development opportunities for group members
- Fostering research among members
- Capacity to simultaneously lead, listen, assess the dialogue, take notes to identify learning points, monitor progress, and provide personalized feedback adapted to the maturity level of groups or individuals.

Integrity and ethics
- Convincing through becoming an example of reflection on one's own practice and of learning-oriented professional
- Inspiring confidence and respect within the team
- Reliability

Resilience
- Facing adversities and overcoming obstacles
- Patience and persistence to build a PLC/CoP
- Determination

Democratic attitude
- A democratic attitude that allows everyone to participate in the group and the problem-solving process equally.
- Sourcing information from the group
- Ability to persuade through reasoned arguments rather than imposition.

Need for specific support/training for PLC/CoP leaders

Needs of leaders of face-to-face PLCs/CoPs

The leaders interviewed either lacked formal training or only received basic training for their role of leading PLCs/CoPs. Continuous support and training are considered to be essential for enhancing the effectiveness of a leader within a PLC/CoP. Here are the components of this support. These categories encompass a comprehensive range of areas requiring support and training for leaders to effectively lead PLCs/CoPs.

- **Continuous professional development:** Continuous training is demanded to ensure that leaders remain up-to-date with the latest research, educational theories, and teaching methodologies, tailored to their specific needs.
- **Institutional and resource support:** School administration and educational governing bodies should provide necessary resources, including time and suitable physical spaces for collaboration.
- **Introduction of innovative teaching methodologies:** Implementing innovative teaching methods improves the teaching-learning process.
- **Familiarization with digital tools** to enrich teaching-learning processes and facilitate remote collaboration among teachers.
- **Meeting management skills**, for planning, conducting and evaluating meetings.
- Leadership skills development such as effective team management, conflict resolution, and motivation strategies, is seen as crucial.
- **Effective assessment techniques** to help monitor progress and identify areas for continuous improvement.
- **Establishment of support networks:** Creating support networks of leaders is considered to allow for the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and best practices among leaders.
- **Implementation of evaluation and feedback systems** to enable reflection on leadership performance and activities.

- **Promotion of reflection and inquiry skills among teachers** so that they can critically analyze their teaching practices, identify areas for improvement, and set goals for professional development and student learning.

Needs of leaders of online PLCs/CoPs

In the context of online PLCs/CoPs, the following needs for support are mentioned by the leaders in the interviews:

- Acquiring **familiarity with digital tools** and platforms for online communication, collaboration, and video conferencing.
- Employing 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 **building remote relationships** by organizing virtual informal meetings, "get-to-know-you" sessions, and online team-building activities to foster a warm and welcoming atmosphere.
- **Effective time management** in virtual environments, guiding members in setting clear objectives, prioritizing tasks, and providing technical support and training opportunities.
- Implementing **online assessment and feedback mechanisms** to facilitate quick adjustments and adaptation of strategies to meet group needs.

- **Adapting leadership**, facilitation, and advisory approaches to suit the particularities of digital communication and collaboration.

PLC/CoP leaders' expectations of facilitators

The only national report addressing this topic was the one from Spain, and the following conclusions emerged from it:

- School leaders anticipate that external facilitators will promote a collaborative environment suitable for mutual learning and professional growth.
- Leaders also anticipate that external facilitators will possess a comprehensive understanding of the school's characteristics and improvement areas, enabling them to offer tailored support in areas pertinent to both the school and its teaching staff.

5 Findings from FGs with student teachers participating in a PLC

Characterization

A total of 35 student teachers from Austria, Germany, and Spain participated in focus groups (FGs) or individual interviews. They were asked to share their experiences regarding leadership or moderation within the student teacher Professional Learning Communities (ST-PLCs) they were part of. These students participated in ST-PLCs either during their regular university courses or during mandatory internships as part of their pre-service teacher education program.

Leader's roles and responsibilities in an ST-PLC

The student teachers mentioned assuming the following roles and responsibilities when they took on the role of leader or moderator in their PLC meetings:

— **Structuring meetings and time management:** Ensuring adherence to a structured PLC format and managing time effectively to cover meeting stages and focus on planned discussion topics.

— **Prevention of deviations:** The moderator ensures that discussions stay on topic and intervenes to prevent tangents.

— **Documentation management:** Taking meeting minutes and handling other documentation aspects of the PLC.

— **Organizing communication:** Facilitating communication by giving members the floor and ensuring all have the opportunity to speak.

— **Fostering reflection and analysis:** Encouraging deeper reflection and analysis among members through thought-provoking questions, especially in the initial meetings.

— **Encouraging participation:** Ensuring all members have the opportunity to contribute to discussions, regardless of their level of talkativeness or apparent participation.

— **Ensuring equal opportunities:** Ensuring that all members have an equal opportunity to participate in discussions, addressing any perceived lack of participation by providing opportunities for intervention.

— **Supporting learning:** Taking responsibility for asking reflection-oriented questions to enhance learning among members.

— **Impact on initial meetings:** Playing a more significant role in ensuring effectiveness during initial meetings when members are becoming familiar with PLC dynamics and purposes.

— **Adaptation over time:** Becoming less significant as members become accustomed to PLC meetings and dynamics, as the need for explicit leadership decreases.

— **Acknowledging individual contributions:** Recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of each member, reflecting their individual personalities and communication styles.

Leader effectiveness in an ST-PLC: Key influencing factors

The student teachers interviewed generally agreed on the importance of moderation in ensuring productive ST-PLC meetings and keeping discussions on track. They typically took turns serving as the leader or moderator of the PLC meeting, ensuring an equitable distribution of tasks. However, student teachers from one of the FGs in Austria expressed a preference for the leadership role in their ST-PLC to be consistently held by a member possessing the requisite skills and familiarity with this position. Similarly, students from Germany mentioned that having an external facilitator contributed to effective collaboration.

The following factors were mentioned as influential factors for leader effectiveness in a ST-PLC:

- Leadership, communication, and group management skills of the member assuming the role of leader or moderator
- Free choice of topics and a wide variety of topics
- ST-PLC participants' assurance that they are correctly implementing PLC practices
- A clear allocation of roles and responsibilities in the initial stages of the PLC
- The ST-PLC participants' intrinsic motivation
- Inconsistent participation and motivation levels among group members can impact PLC effectiveness.

Student teachers from one of the FGs in Austria, favor having lecturers in control to guarantee the effectiveness of the PLC.

Challenges faced by the leader in an ST-PLC

- **Understanding the concept of the PLC and the role of the leader in the PLC meetings:** This challenge particularly arose at the initial ST-PLC meetings. The model structure of the sessions provided by university tutors and the outlined role of the meeting leader significantly aided them in grasping their responsibilities.

- **Fostering inquiry:** While serving as PLC meeting leaders, student teachers used questions to encourage reflection and deeper analysis among members. However, they were unaware that they had fostered inquiry, as it occurred naturally as part of individual members' action plans rather than being intentionally promoted by the meeting leader.

- **Different working methods and attitudes:** ST-PLCs face challenges related to varying working methods, attitudes, and quality standards within the group, leading to power struggles and conflicts.

- **Balancing roles of lecturer:** Student teachers identified a key challenge in the conflict between the roles of lecturers as examiners and facilitators. Finding a balance between assessment and facilitation is crucial to prevent students from feeling monitored or hesitant to freely express themselves.

- **Maintaining motivation:** Leaders should be able to motivate the group, but external facilitators, such as lecturers, can also play a supportive role in encouraging the group, particularly after setbacks.

Competences and characteristics of a 'good' leader in an ST-PLC

According to the student teachers' view, the following categories include the abilities and qualities expected of a competent ST-PLC leader:

Communication skills
- Conversational skills
- Active listening
- Addressing issues assertively and tactfully
- Facilitating communication and equal participation
- Summarizing discussions effectively
- Ensuring that everybody can participate in the discussion
- Moderation skills

Reflection-promoting skills
- Asking questions to facilitate deeper reflection
- Methods to provide reflection and feedback

Organizational skills
- Effective time management
- Keeping the meeting on track

Democratic competences
- Conflict management
- Appreciative of others' contributions
- Respectful
- Fostering equal participation in the discussion from all members

Personal skills

- Sense of responsibility
- Calmness
- Empathy
- Motivational skills

Need for specific support/training for leaders in an ST-PLC

The following are the needs for support and/or training that student teachers perceive when they assume the role of the leader in their ST-PLC:

– A comprehensive introduction to the concept and benefits of PLC work
– Understanding of the different roles and areas of responsibility within a PLC.
– Implications of a democratic mindset emphasizing equal participation and questioning of traditional power structures.
– Presentation of specific PLC working methods.
– Demonstration of realistic time frames for processes within PLC work.
– Provision of working materials such as templates for action plans and meeting minutes.
– Tools for effective group work.
– Skills in discussion and conflict management.
– Communication skills within the group and effective collaboration.
– Training in leading student teams, preferably provided by experts and integrated into university education.

The student teachers in the focus groups expressed their willingness to participate in training sessions aimed at developing these skills. Specifically, the students from Spain emphasized that such training would be most beneficial if provided at the beginning of their university education.

ST-PLC meetings in an online setting

The students interviewed found that online ST-PLC meetings using Google Meet and Zoom effectively served their needs, despite the preference for in-person meetings due to their facilitation of more natural communication. Nevertheless, online meetings were considered a practical solution for efficient collaboration over long distances. However, they encountered challenges such as the lack of direct contact, which affected communication and group cohesion. While they noted no difference in the level of

reflective discussion achieved between online and in-person meetings, they highlighted issues like turn-taking and limitations in non-verbal communication, technical proficiency, and distractions as disadvantages of online meetings. Successful online PLC meetings require clear agreements, technical proficiency, and adherence to online etiquette rules.

The skills necessary for online moderation include technical proficiency and the ability to manage participant activity. External facilitators may encounter difficulties in observing participant engagement and providing tailored support in online sessions. Regular participation of external facilitators in online sessions is seen as advantageous for effective support.

Student teachers' expectations of external facilitators in an ST-PLC

The student teachers expect the external facilitator to possess a diverse set of skills and characteristics, including:

- **Content and empirical knowledge:** Understanding of the subject matter content and practical experience in the field, ability to deliver content in a structured and coherent manner and direct involvement or familiarity with PLCs
- **Social and conversational skills:** Ability to engage effectively in discussions and interactions within the PLC, guide reflection and provide constructive and timely feedback.
- **Support:** Recognizing when support is needed and offering assistance in conflict resolution and improving internal moderation.
- **Methodological competence:** Understanding of various methods and strategies for facilitating learning.
- **Openness and trust:** Willingness to listen, accept ideas, and build trust within the PLC.
- **Democratic skills:** Skills including openness and trust, treating students as equals, allowing them to take ownership of their learning process, fostering open communication, promoting a higher level of participant involvement, and allowing the ST-PLC to lead decision-making processes.
- **Flexibility:** Adaptability to changing circumstances and openness to new ideas.
- **Empathy:** Understanding and sensitivity towards the feelings and perspectives of others.

Conclusions

Based on the overview provided regarding roles, practices, competences, challenges, and areas requiring professional development for PLC/CoP leaders and facilitators, the following conclusions can be made relevant to a training program in PLC leadership and facilitation:

- The competences identified in the national reports for serving as leaders and facilitators are complex and multifaceted, encompassing a range of knowledges, skills, and attitudes.
- Some competences, actions implemented, and challenges faced when acting as leaders or facilitators are similar, indicating shared areas of support within PLC/CoPs for both roles.
- However, certain aspects depend on the specific position held within the PLC/CoP. In this context, while facilitators are expected to have a strong understanding of the PLC/CoP context, leaders typically have deeper knowledge of the school context, the strengths and potential of the teaching staff, and the specific improvement needs of the school. They are also responsible for aligning these needs with broader educational programs and initiatives. Additionally, a potential challenge may arise where the leader of a PLC holds a position of authority, such as a headteacher, which could impact the dynamics within the PLC. This situation could lead to power imbalances or conflicts within the group. This is not an issue, when external facilitators rather than leaders support the PLC.
- Facilitation/Leading practices, roles and support/training needs can be categorized in the following five main groups:
  - **Relational dimension:** This involves creating a supportive and conducive environment for collective learning. It focuses on factors such as empathy, encouragement, and trust-building among participants.
  - **Collaborative work dimension:** This dimension emphasizes collaboration and interactions within the group. It involves facilitating teamwork, encouraging active participation, and fostering a sense of professional community among members.
  - **Learning and knowledge-building dimension:** The focus is on enhancing teachers' pedagogical knowledge and improving their practice.
  - **Reflection and inquiry dimension:** This involves creating opportunities for both individual and collective reflection and inquiry, critically analyzing the experiences, gathering evidences, and analyzing them for student improvement.

- **Communication dimension:** This dimension is about optimizing communication effectiveness within the group.
- **Organizational dimension**: This dimension covers logistical aspects like scheduling and resourcing to ensure regular meetings. They also maintain focus on tasks, monitor progress, and handle documentation.

Annex A: Focus Group Interview Protocol: Topic Areas

Themes/Contents addressed in the interview:

A. Experience as PLC leaders/facilitators
- Reasons for choosing a PLC as a context/approach for professional learning goals and expectations (context
- Kind and amount of experience with PLCs
- Roles and actions of the facilitator/leader
- Expected roles and actions of the participants in a PLC
- Factors influencing the effectiveness of facilitator's/leader's actions
- Criteria and methods for evaluating the effectiveness of facilitation and impact

B. Challenges encountered
- Description and reasoning regarding the challenges for the facilitator/leader
- Description and reasoning regarding the challenges for the participants in a PLC
- Description of facilitating inquiry and reflection in a PLC
- Challenges in fostering inquiry and reflection in a PLC

C. Specific competencies and/or personality characteristics of a 'good' leader or facilitator
- Competencies of the facilitator/leader
- Characteristics of the facilitator/leader
- Personality of facilitator/leader
- Relation of competencies/characteristics/personality of facilitators/leader to fostering reflection, inquiry, engagement and effective change

D. Need for support/training
- Prior training / support to become a facilitator/leader
- Wish/need for support – description of support
- Willingness to participate in a training programme

E. Leading/facilitating in an online setting
- Prior experience in facilitating/leading in an online setting

- Possibilities and difficulties in stimulating inquiry, reflection and participation within a PLC in an online setting
- Adopted tools
- Competencies needed for facilitation /leadership in an online setting

Annex B: Informed consent

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

Erasmus+ 2023-1-DE03-KA220-SCH-DAB36DB1 - Cooperation partnerships in school education

Informed Consent

Purpose

The University of (XXX) is conducting focus group interviews within the framework of the LeaFaP Erasmus+ project. You are invited to participate. The purpose of the study is to better understand the experiences, roles, needs, challenges and competences of leaders and facilitators of learning communities/communities of practice/teachers or headteachers' groups. We will use this information to inform the theoretical and practice-based framework that will be used to develop activities and materials to train and build the capacities of these leaders and facilitators.

Procedures

If you participate in this study, you will be in a group of approximately four to six people. There will be a moderator who will ask questions and facilitate the discussion, and one or two note-takers to write down the ideas expressed within the group. The interview will be audio and/or video-recorded for analysis purposes. If you volunteer to participate in this focus group, you will be asked some questions concerning your experience with leading or facilitating learning communities/communities of practice/teachers or headteachers' groups. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time.

Benefits and Risks

Your participation may benefit you and other professionals involved in leading or facilitating learning communities/communities of practice/teachers or headteachers' groups. There is no expectation of any risk higher than what one may encounter in ordinary conversation. Everyone in the group will be asked to keep everything stated

during the conversation private and confidential. However, it is important to keep in mind that not everyone in other people in the group with you may not keep all information private and confidential.

Confidentiality

Anonymous data from this study will be analysed by the participants in the LeaFaP project. No individual participant will be identified or associated to specific data or findings. All information obtained in this study will be kept strictly confidential. All materials will be stored in a secure location within the University of XXXX and access to files will be restricted to project participants.

Consent

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this focus group.

Participant's signature: _____

Printed name: _____
Date: _____

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact XXX XXX at XXXX.