

Professional Learning Communities: A Mechanism for Enhancing Teachers' Professional Agency

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Abstract: This article explores how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) enhance teachers' professional agency. It examines PLCs, as collaborative educational groups, and how they significantly support teaching, enhance students learning experiences, and foster professional development among teachers. The article explains the sociocultural dimensions of agency, highlighting the interaction between individual capacity and environmental factors. Emphasizes the importance of shared values, vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration within PLCs, and their impact on fostering teachers' agency. These elements are pivotal in shaping and strengthening teachers' professional agency, which, in turn, impacts their effectiveness in the classroom. Significant emphasis is placed on the role of collaborative learning within PLCs. This aspect is highlighted as a critical driver for developing and enhancing teachers' professional agency and overall professional development. The article also discusses various interpretations and dimensions of agency in the educational context, drawing on various academic studies and perspectives. The article further discussed some challenges and limitations inherent in implementing PLCs. Critically examines issues such as time constraints, inconsistent application across educational settings, and resistance to collaborative approaches among educators. These challenges underscore the need for a nuanced understanding and strategic implementation of PLCs to maximize their benefits. The conclusion underscores the significance of PLCs as vehicles for developing teacher agency, suggesting that PLCs can offer great benefits for teachers, students, and the broader educational system. By fostering a culture of collaboration and reflective practice, PLCs can significantly enhance teachers' agency.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, Teacher agency, Collaborative learning, Professional development

1. Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a dynamic and collaborative approach to teacher development and student learning. PLCs are teachers who come together as a community to improve their teaching practices and foster professional growth (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997). They are grounded in the concept that collective expertise is more potent than individual teachers working in isolation. PLCs play a significant role in teachers' professional agency and development (Garet et al., 2001). PLCs have been widely adopted in the United States as a means to improve teaching practices and student outcomes (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). A lot of emphasis is placed on the impact of PLCs on teachers' development and agency. Several studies have described what professional learning should look like, but the majority of school systems struggle to provide a valuable professional learning experience for teachers (Meirink et al., 2007). Professional learning communities provide an avenue for teachers to improve themselves and benefit from the experience of their professional colleagues.

This article explores the concept of professional learning community and its relevance to teachers' professional agency and development. It considers the sociocultural aspect of agency, which involves the interaction between individual capacity and disposition. It further discusses the meaning of PLCs and what happens in PLCs, then looks at its key attributes, including shared values and vision, collective responsibility for pupils' learning, reflective professional inquiry, mutual trust, and collaboration focused on learning. Accordingly, the essay considers how these characteristics support teachers' agency, but collaborative learning within PLCs will be given more attention. This is because this feature of PLCs is very significant to teachers' professional agency and development. However, it has also been argued that there is little detailed proof of what happens inside professional learning communities (Philpott & Oates, 2016).

Fullan (2007) explored how PLC could improve teachers' teaching and shape students' learning. Fullan's (2007) work discusses the broader context of educational change within which PLCs operate and addresses challenges in implementing change in educational settings. According to Fullan (2007), PLC is a platform that assists teachers on how to implement some changes in teaching effectively and connect the process with support from peers. PLC supports teachers' development, in that teachers can not only improve their expertise but also advance their pedagogical expertise. PLC could help novice teachers teach students better and

support their learning. Fullan (2007) stated that PLC has made a significant difference in the professional lives of teachers who are members.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Notion of Agency

In recent years, teacher agency has been an interesting subject in various literature on education. The notion of agency has become of increasing interest to a wide range of researchers interested in studying the effects of professional development on teachers' practice. Several studies have recognized the significance of teachers' agency on school improvement (Borko, 2004; Netolicky, 2016). This literature presents some interesting ideas for reinforcing and strengthening teachers' agency. In some contexts, the sociocultural framework of agency is adopted, whereby the notion of agency is presented as an interaction between individuals' capacity and disposition (Philpott & Oates, 2016). This model of agency depicts that personal capacity and disposition originate from a biographical path via various sociocultural contexts. These contexts influence how teachers exercise their agency.

Agency is a broad concept that can have a better meaning based on the context in which it is applied, and this is because there is no universally accepted definition of agency. Agency is commonly referred to as the "capacity to act". It is vital to teachers' performance and improving the quality of teaching and learning (Biesta et al., 2015). According to Anscombe (1957), agency has the capacity to carry out intentional action. Similarly, Davidson (1963) sees agency as the ability to act 'intentionally.' Also, Giddens (1984) claimed that agency is not the intentions individuals possess in carrying out actions; instead, it's their capability to perform those actions in the first place. He argued against the position that, for an action to count as agentic, it must be intentional only under certain accounts. Therefore, the authors explained that agency depicts an individual's capacity to consciously perform and possess the capacity to act according to intention. He equated agency to the ability to achieve planned outcomes. Giddens places more emphasis on the capacity of the individual rather than intention. That is, it's the capacity of an individual that determines how they perform.

Another perspective was recorded by Biesta & Tedder (2007), who noted that agency is not something an individual possesses as property; instead, it's something that individuals do. The authors highlighted that "actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment so that the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and in a sense, always unique situations" (ibid. p.137). Regarding teacher agency, Turnbull (2005) described teacher professional agency as the ability of the teacher to appropriately apply professional knowledge, skills, attitude, and understanding within the confines of professional practice. Similarly, teacher agency was conceived as the teacher's capacity to act professionally within the teaching environment. In this sense, agency means the teacher's capacity to practice their professional knowledge and skills confidently within the teaching scene. Pyhalto et al. (2015) noted that teacher agency is the capacity that shapes how teachers learn both at individual and community levels.

Furthermore, various studies have discussed the relationship between PLCs and teacher agencies (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Lipton & Wellman, 2016; Little, 2003). PLCs are considered a vehicle for increasing interest in teacher agencies regarding professional learning. Philpott and Oates (2016) highlighted the relevance of PLCs as an affordance for the improvement and exercise of teacher agency in relation to professional learning. Notwithstanding, Meirink et al. (2007) argued that there is little evidence on what goes on within PLCs and their effectiveness. Riveros (2012) also maintained that improving teacher agency may be a way to improve the effectiveness and impact of PLCs. Therefore, what is a Professional learning community, what does it look like and how does it function, and to what extent has it impacted teachers' agency and professional development?

2.2 Professional Learning Communities

Teachers' professional learning and development are believed to be a core objective of educational institutions (James and McCormick, 2009). The professional development of teachers is a vital aspect that determines the school system's progress. Therefore, an effective professional learning community is vital to teachers' improvement and a better teaching and learning experience. Shirley Hord, an authority in leadership, gave a coherent illustration of the notion of PLC. She pointed out the three words that describe PLCs: (professional, learning, and community). Whereby professional means coming together in a group – a community – to learn (The Glossary of Educational Reform, 2004). PLCs have been termed in different ways across different schools and places. Some schools refer to it as a professional learning group; in other places, it is called a collaborative learning community, while in some places, it is called a community of practice (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Schlager et al., 2002). Hord (1997) referred to PLC as a strategy in which:

Teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and act on their learning. Their actions aim to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. The notion, therefore, draws attention to the potential for a range of people, based inside and outside a school, to mutually enhance each other's and pupils' learning and school development (cited in Hairon et al., p.75).

This definition is an approach to a broader understanding of PLC, its goal, its description of how it operates, and its significance within the school system. In simple terms, PLCs entail "professionals coming together in a group – a community – to learn" (Hord, p.10). In like manner, PLC was defined as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (thereby presenting us with another long list of essentially contestable concepts), the fundamental purpose of which is 'to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals, for students' ultimate benefit' (Stoll et al. 2006; cited in Watson, 2014, p.19)

PLC is known to perform two primary purposes: firstly, the development of the knowledge and skills of teachers via cooperative study, exchange of knowledge and expertise, and professional discussion. Secondly, building educational aims and objectives improves students' performance through firm leadership and standard teaching (The Glossary of Educational Reform, 2004). Similarly, PLCs act as a kind of action research. That is a continuous appraisal, improvement, and questioning of teaching methods and existing knowledge. It tends to foster better collaboration among teachers and administrators. This is because teachers are known to work independently and individually; they make their lesson notes and teach in a closed classroom with little feedback from their colleagues. However, PLC tends to bridge this gap by offering a collaborative framework where teachers can share their thoughts, experiences, educational philosophies, and teaching styles in a group.

Furthermore, Dufour (2004) maintained that PLC enhances and reinforces a variation of effective professional practices between teachers within the school arena. He noted that PLC focuses on learning rather than teaching. It teaches teachers to work collaboratively and be accountable for results. Likewise, it gives teachers a sense of leadership in which teachers may take on leadership roles and be more involved in school improvement. The teachers may be professionally prepared and confident to confront and meet the needs of their pupils. In addition, PLCs may also promote trust among teachers and make their professional relationships stronger.

2.3 The Impact of PLCs on Teachers' Professional Development and Agency

Bolam et al. (2005) presented various features of professional learning communities, including shared values and vision, mutual trust, reflective professional inquiry, collective responsibility, and collaboration. Thus, the combination of these various elements defines an effective PLC. How do each of these characteristics of PLCs support teachers' agency and professional development? The essay will consider each of these elements and how they impact teachers' agency and development, but the feature of professional collaboration will be given more attention.

2.3.1 Shared values and vision

Shared values and vision, identified as the first characteristics of PLCs, are significant elements because they ensure the group members have similar values and visions that guide them within the community. Although the community comprises members with different educational philosophies and belief systems, this feature promotes uniformity within the community. According to Louis and Kruse (1995), a fundamental element of PLC is a strong focus on shared values and vision. These common values produce an organized pattern of behaviors among the group members. In this manner, members are accountable for their actions, but the group's overall vision is placed above personal ambition. Martel (1993) spelled out the vision of PLCs as a focus on "the quality of life, quality of work, quality of learning – in short, a total quality focus" (cited in Hord, 1997, p.21).

However, Lumby (2006) argued that the vision is an "optical one"; he claimed that "one glance and what appears is the commonly accepted idea of values and vision-driven leadership. Shift the angle slightly, and the picture becomes much more disquieting; schools where the deletion of 'other' is disguised as values-based inclusion and democracy (cited in Watson, 2014; p.22). In addition, Watson (2014) maintained that the emphasis on having jointly held values conceals the existence of inappropriate values present in various educational policies and practices in schools. Thevenot (2006) added that the call to differentiate between right and wrong actions based on critical justification is a central human function. Hairon et al. (2017) noted that collective responsibility is critical because it draws attention to the need for professionalism within the community as much as group members ensure collective responsibility for pupil learning.

2.3.2 Mutual trust

Professional learning communities emphasize the need for mutual trust among community members. However, it was argued that "too much trust arising from some strong social ties may encourage extreme cohesion and so give rise to dysfunctionality, particularly in the form of groupthink (Bolam, 2005). Hence, this depicts that PLCs should devise means to know whom to trust, who should be closely observed, and under what conditions. Moreover, Lecioni (2007) identified a lack of trust as a challenge for PLCs. He noted that "a lack of trust occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses, or needs for help. Without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is impossible.

2.3.3 Reflective professional inquiry

Louis and Kruse (1995) noted that reflective professional inquiry is a collaborative activity in which teachers inquire about pupils, teaching, and learning to point out issues and challenges affecting effective practice. He believed that, as teachers inquire together, they create community. Questioning enables them to overcome guilt based on classification, grade, and subject area. This act enhances discussion among teachers about what is essential. It facilitates understanding among teachers and better working conditions for themselves and others. Reflective inquiry enables members of the community to create the link that connects them together as a group and that connects them to a common set of ideas (Ahika, 2023; Muoneke, 2023)

2.3.4 Collective responsibility

The idea of PLCs is a place where teachers continuously develop their capacity to create and achieve planned outcomes. Where innovation and autonomy are promoted, professional thinking patterns are nurtured, and teachers are continually developing the skills to learn together (Adekunle et al., 2023; Hord, 1997). This strategy helps teachers from different educational backgrounds to come together and work together collectively and continuously. This opportunity equips them with the needed knowledge and capacity to produce their intended desired activities.

3. Discussion

According to Hargreaves (2019), Professional Learning Communities are essentially a transformative framework in education aimed at improving not just student learning but also the professional capabilities of teachers. PLCs operate on the principle of distributed leadership. Teachers are not just implementers of prescribed policies but leaders and decision-makers (Ikpuri, 2018; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). This shift from a top-down approach to a more democratic, shared model empowers teachers, giving them a stronger sense of control and ownership over their professional practices and development. In PLCs, students' success is a collective responsibility. This culture fosters a sense of agency in teachers as they work collaboratively to develop strategies that address diverse student needs. The collective efficacy that develops in PLCs can positively impact teachers' belief in their ability to affect student learning (Ikpuri, 2023).

PLCs prioritize reflective dialogue and inquiry. Regular meetings and discussions provide a platform for teachers to critically analyze their teaching practices, share insights, and learn from each other. This reflective practice is vital for professional growth and development, fostering a deeper understanding of teaching practices and student learning processes. PLCs emphasize the use of data to inform teaching practices. Teachers collaboratively analyze student performance data to identify learning gaps and devise strategies to address them. This data-driven approach ensures that decisions are grounded in evidence, enhancing teachers' professional judgment and decision-making skills. The dynamic nature of PLCs encourages continuous learning and adaptation. Teachers are constantly exposed to new ideas, teaching strategies, and educational research. This ongoing learning process is essential for teachers to remain relevant and effective in their profession.

Teaching can be an isolated profession. PLCs counteract this by creating a supportive community where teachers can share challenges and successes. This sense of community is crucial for teacher morale and can lead to a more sustained and fulfilling career. While PLCs focus on the micro-level of classroom teaching, they are also aligned with the macro goals of the educational system (Vescio et al., 2018). This alignment ensures that teachers' collaborative efforts are coherent with the broader educational objectives, thereby amplifying their impact.

3.1 Professional collaboration within PLCs

The idea of professional collaboration as a strategy for developing teacher agency and professional development has been prevalent in several studies. Much emphasis has been placed on PLCs as an avenue where teachers can work together to improve their skills and students' learning. It's an avenue where isolated individuals can be more engaged with colleagues. This strategy is very significant to teacher agency and

professional development, but in most PLCs, this appears not to be the case. In Canada, the Alberta Commission on Learning spelled out the primary goal of PLCs, which is to be a community whereby "Teachers and administrators continuously seek and share information and act on what they have learned, and all their efforts are concentrated on improving their practice so that students can achieve the best possible results" (Alberta commission on learning, 2003; cited in Riveros et al., 2012, p.204). Riveros et al. (2012) believed that PLCs have the possibility of impacting teachers' agency and improving teachers learning. They further noted that school-based peer collaboration is one of the potential ways teachers can gain knowledge about their profession and develop each other, producing better practice.

The strategy of PLCs is perhaps one of Canada's most adopted strategies for teachers' professional development (Riveros et al., 2012). Most Educational Ministries, Schools, and Teachers Associations in Canada include this strategy in their policy document (ibid). Joyce and Showers (2004) presented the notion of 'peer coaching' PLCs, indicating that "Teachers' lack of interpersonal support and close contact with others in the context of teaching is a tragedy. Practically, most coaching should be performed by teams of teachers working together to study new approaches to teaching and polish their existing skills (cited in Riveros et al., 2012, p.206). The idea of peer coaching with PLCs calls for collaboration between school teachers to enhance their skills and performance in practice. Similarly, Schaefer (1967), an advocate for team teaching in the 1960s, maintained that teachers should engage with other colleagues to share their experience and expertise to improve each other's skills and performance.

However, Kwakman (2013) observed that teachers do not always utilize PLC as a learning aid. He observed that teachers do not work together to make lesson notes or observe their colleagues while in class to get constructive feedback. This finding suggests that there is a need to pay more attention to collaboration among teachers within PLCs. Teachers need to move from isolative practices to collaborative practices. There is a need to move from seclusion to working as a team. Therefore, collaborative learning is very significant within PLCs. For instance, Edward (2015) recorded that professional learning communities should involve the intentional use of other teachers as a learning aid and a resource to support other community members.

Furthermore, teachers' professional agency is relational and is rooted in the professional interaction among teachers (Pyhalto et al., 2015). Thus, teachers' professional development partly depends on their engagement with other teachers through PLCs. (Stoll et al., 2006). Meirink et al. (2010) noted that collaboration between teachers appears to be very significant for teachers as agents of change. It was stated that collaboration among teachers positively impacts teachers' learning and professional development. Also, Fullan (2007) indicated that teachers working together would enable them to form an effective collaboration with colleagues. Moreover, Lukacs (2009) noted that teachers could use their collaborative tool to bring about insightful discussions and constructive feedback about their teaching that can improve their agency. This collaborative strategy can also be used to bring about educational change and improve student learning. Furthermore, it was evident in the study of Pyhalto et al. (2015) that teachers need each other to develop themselves and their teaching skills. It is widely agreed that experts in different fields coming together in the professional community are relevant for educational change. Teachers can effectively influence their working environment by embracing different collaborative strategies and engagement with the professional learning community.

However, there is evidence that teachers are sometimes responsible for their professional development. Soini et al. (2010) recorded that "teachers who experienced a positive work drive and empowerment in their work reported using active, reflective, and holistic problem-solving strategies as well as self-regulation strategies to handle stressful interactions and challenges proactively" (cited in Pyhalto et al., p.815). This implies that some teachers confront their professional challenges and cynicism independently without the aid of colleagues or PLCs. On the contrary, Pyhalto (2015) noted that seeking help from a colleague may help to reduce the stress and sense of isolation teachers may experience. The author further stated that colleague assistance improves teachers' performance when faced with a high-stress level. Also, Pomaki et al. (2010) pointed out that teachers receiving support and assistance from other teachers have less desire to quit the teaching profession than those with lower or no support.

In addition, Hoy and Spero (2005) found that teachers who lack a collaborative relationship with colleagues are more emotionally vulnerable. Therefore, building an environment that stimulates and encourages active help-seeking and collaborative problem-solving within PLCs is for teacher agency and professional development. This suggests an environment that promotes collaboration among teachers and utilizes the available human resources to aid teacher learning and reduce work stress, preventing isolation, encouraging engagement, and providing an avenue to confront complex teaching challenges collectively. By fostering a collaborative, reflective, and data-driven culture, PLCs enhance teachers' agency, enabling them to become more effective educators and change agents within their schools and the broader educational landscape.

4. Limitation

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been widely adopted in the United States as a means to improve teaching practices and student outcomes. However, like any educational model, they are not without their limitations and criticisms. Abbott (2014) identified several challenges encountered by PLCs when implementing their goals. He reported that insufficient support from the head of the school and the school leaders led to a shortage of time and resources invested in the group. By the same token, when the group's goals are not spelled out, it may lead to poor concentration in discussions during meetings and doubts about the main motive of the group. Also, different educational philosophies, learning patterns, and belief systems can cause disagreement among the group members and may affect the collective and collaborative aspect of the group, which is a significant factor in the group's success.

One of the most significant challenges of implementing PLCs effectively is the time requirement. Teachers often have very busy schedules, and finding additional time for regular PLC meetings can be difficult. This can lead to rushed or infrequent meetings that do not fully realize the potential of the collaborative process. The success of PLCs heavily depends on how they are implemented. There can be significant variation in the quality and effectiveness of PLCs across different schools and districts. In some cases, PLCs might be implemented in name only, without the necessary support, resources, and commitment to make them effective. Some educators may resist the collaborative approach of PLCs, especially if they are accustomed to working independently. This resistance can stem from a lack of understanding of the PLC process, fear of criticism, or reluctance to change established practices.

Furthermore, critics argue that PLCs can place too much emphasis on data and standardized testing, potentially leading to a narrow focus on test preparation at the expense of broader educational goals. This can also lead to a one-size-fits-all approach to education, which may not address the unique needs of all students. For PLCs to be effective, teachers need appropriate training and ongoing support. However, not all schools provide the necessary professional development or facilitative leadership to support the effective functioning of PLCs. This lack of support can hinder the growth and development of PLCs. Effective collaboration requires positive group dynamics, but achieving this is not always easy. Conflicts can arise due to differing opinions, teaching philosophies, or personal issues. Managing these dynamics requires skilled facilitation, which may not always be present. Implementing PLCs effectively can require significant resources, including time, training, and materials. In resource-strapped schools, these requirements can be a significant hurdle, limiting the potential effectiveness of PLCs.

PLCs may inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequities if not carefully facilitated. For instance, if certain voices or perspectives dominate the conversation, it can lead to a lack of diverse viewpoints and approaches in teaching and learning. Some educators argue that the impact of PLCs on student achievement is difficult to measure and that undue pressure for demonstrable results can detract from the collaborative learning process. There is a need to ask questions about the impacts on teachers' agency and professional development. From a research perspective, it's been stated that PLCs may be an object of criticism when the group's stated goals are not rightly implemented or poorly facilitated. As well as when the group appears unfocused and not properly organized (The Glossary of Educational Reform, 2004). Similarly, Nelson et al. (2010) asserted that there is a need to ask questions about learning goals, instructional practices, and student attainment. This is meant to consider the extent to which PLCs are being functional and making impacts rather than appearing to be a channel for subjecting teachers to conventional patterns of schooling (Cited in Watson 2014, p.21)

5. Conclusion

This essay has discussed the relationship between teacher agency and professional learning communities. That is, how PLCs contribute to teacher agency and professional development. It explored some conceptions of agency, teacher agency, and professional learning communities. It considered how various characteristics of PLCs (Bolam et al., 2005) enhance teachers' agency and professional development. Agency as a concept is essential to the profession of teaching. A. Giddens (1984) viewed it as a teacher's ability to achieve planned outcomes, something inherent in the individual teacher. Biesta and Tedder (2007) stated in their work that agency depended on the individual teacher and their environment. Agency can then be seen as a combination of a teacher's capacity and resources, ultimately determining the teacher's "intentions" and "actions." Agency, therefore, influences the way teachers engage with students. Professional learning communities provide a vehicle for teachers to develop their individual capacities and resources teachers would need to achieve their goals. This is not always the case, as some teachers might not leverage PLCs' benefits to develop themselves.

However, it was identified that despite some of the impacts of PLCs on teachers' agency and professional development, most PLCs appeared not to make many impacts. This is because the PLCs' environments seem to be mechanical, where teachers are told what to do in a structured and conventional manner. This affects the teachers' autonomy and sense of identity. PLCs are supposed to be an avenue where teachers can develop

autonomy. It's meant to be where teachers are trained to do things differently and be professionally independent and self-determined, but most PLCs appear not to be so. Overall, PLCs are a mechanism for developing teachers' professional agency and can be improved upon to ensure that they optimally meet the needs of the teachers. These benefits will extend to the students and the educational system.

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