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**PROCEEDINGS BOOK**

**EDITORS:**

Dr. Ethem İlhan Şahin

Dr. Nurlan Akhmetov

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## THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS (TRIANGULATED RESEARCH)

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### ABSTRACT

As several current research studies from the last decade show, professional learning communities represent an important element in the professional development of many professions. Our work is based on the assumption that professional learning communities are also an important factor in the development of the teaching profession. The authors of the study analyze the role of professional learning communities based on three sources of data obtained in three separate research studies: (1) from a meta-analysis of international research studies related to teacher development in the 2nd decade of the 21st century, published in journals indexed via WoS and Scopus; (2) from a national survey on methods of lifelong professional development of teachers in the Slovak Republic; and finally (3) from an exploration of the professional development of teachers of foreign languages in primary schools. By evaluating the obtained data of these three research studies and comparing them with each other from the point of view of teachers, specific recommendations for the practical application of professional learning communities in the context of schools and school facilities emerged.

**Keywords:** professional learning communities, research, teachers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: THEORY AND CONTEXT

Before presenting our thesis, research and its results, let us explain two main concepts of our study.

The first of them is the concept of **professional learning communities (PLCs)**. According to some authors, this concept evolved from the term Community of Practice (CoP) in the beginning of the 1990s (e.g. by Lave & Wenger). The basic idea of CoP as well as of PLCs has been to contribute to professional development of teachers. In the words of Shah & Malik (2024, p. 313), “a significant factor in raising educational standards and student achievement is improving teachers’ instructional capacity in the classroom”.

Nowadays, there is no such thing as one unified definition of PLCs. Experts look at them from different points of view. Stol et al (2006, p. 223) generalize the overall international consensus, based on the statements about PLCs by various experts that they refer to, with the following generalization:

“PLCS is a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Toole & Louis, 2002); operating as a collective enterprise (King & Newmann, 2001). Summarising the literature,

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Hord (1997, p.1) blends process and anticipated outcomes in defining a ‘professional community of learners’ (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree & Fernandez, 1993).”

It can therefore be said that PLCs are an umbrella term for groups or networks of cooperating professionals for the purpose of mutual enrichment, sharing learning experiences, reflecting on their professional practice and thus growing professionally together. They meet together, either physically or via online platforms (e.g. Teams, Zoom) at different time intervals. Paradoxically, the “community of colleagues with whom” we work is “one of the most underused resources available to educators (Caine & Caine, 2010, p. 1).

Since we are going to speak about teachers’ PLCs, the term **pedeutology** will be used. **Pedeutology** is the theory of the teaching profession, its core content, social function and preparation for this profession (Kasáčová, 2004, pp. 5–13). Pedeutology has a relatively long tradition in Central Europe. Although its primary function was to establish certain normative requirements for teachers, it became a gradually developing educational science. Pedeutology focuses on:

- Undergraduate teacher training (its philosophy, content, curriculum structure, theory/practice ratio);
- Biodromal career of a teacher (all its phases: the phase of choosing a profession and an experienced teacher, life-long education of teachers, occupational risks, burn-out);
- Professional activities of teachers (pedagogical thinking, communication, competence, profессиography);
- Historical development of the teaching profession;
- International comparisons through statistics and other data on teachers;
- Typology of teachers (according to school levels, subjects, psychological characteristics, etc.);
- Social and economic status of teachers;
- Morality of the teaching profession;
- Pedeutological research.

From a pedeutological perspective, PLCs provide a supportive environment for teachers to collaborate, exchange ideas, and improve their teaching practices. Teachers can discuss instructional strategies, share resources, analyze student data, and reflect on their teaching experiences. The concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) is one of the most frequented pedeutological topics in the last 30 years (Zhang et al, 2023; Cheng & Zhao, 2023).

There are several typologies of pedeutological PLCs that can be recognized: a) discipline-based professional learning communities (DIPLCs) – creating networks of subject teachers who discuss the same subject issues, often from the same school; b) PLCs aimed at acquiring pedagogical content knowledge “within specific disciplines or roles” (Shapiro & Mendels, 2022, p. 5). Some PLCs operate at school level, others at a regional, national or even transnational scale. Ministries of education in some countries pay explicit attention to facilitating PLCs among teachers. There are several PLCs models depending on the presence or absence of a PLC facilitator – an expert in PLC models and PLC procedures.

“Professional learning communities are a platform to cultivate professional growth and student achievement simultaneously” Wilson (2016, p. 45). Wilson goes on to summarize several research studies focusing on evidence of improved student achievement and increased teacher professional growth through PLCs since the 1990s in her study “From Professional Practice to Practical Leader”.

More recently, Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) conducted a longitudinal study examining the impact of PLCs on teacher professional development. Their research spanned several years and demonstrated that sustained involvement in PLCs positively impacts teacher practice and student achievement. The study highlighted the need for continuous support and reflective practices within PLCs to maximize their effectiveness. Collectively, these studies contribute to the large body of literature on PLCs and provide valuable insights into their conceptualization, impact, and challenges.

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Researchers continue to explore new dimensions of PLCs, considering factors such as technology integration, leadership dynamics, and the scalability of PLC models in different educational settings.

Teachers PLCs encompass commonly held convictions and values, the unified identity shared by PLC participants, a collective background of shared experiences, an aptitude for continuous, sustaining teacher development, a distinct emphasis on enhancing student learning outcomes, collaborative interaction, and active engagement, interdependence or reciprocal obligations, consideration for individual and minority perspectives, substantial and well-coordinated interpersonal relationships, as well as supportive structural conditions, including the provision of time and space for PLC-related activities. Additionally, reflective professional inquiry, characterized by a thoughtful exchange of ideas concerning significant issues, is integral to the functioning of these communities.

According to Shah & Malik (2024), teachers PLCs provide space for shared beliefs and values, collective identity of PLC members, history of shared experience, capacity for continuous teacher learning, clear focus on student learning, collaboration/interaction and participation, interdependence or reciprocal obligation, concern for individual and minority views, meaningful, harmonized relationships, supportive structural conditions such as availability of time and space for PLC matters, and reflective professional inquiry – a kind of reflective exchange of ideas about important issues.” So, as the research shows, “the professional environment is marred by the absence of a genuine professional learning community and the ubiquity of a mindset plagued by professional isolation and haunted by self-survival” (Shah & Malik, 2024, p. 319).

Thanks to modern technologies, several online PLC models have recently been created, which are characterized by unique possibilities of supporting the intensive development of supra-regional and transnational networking, and thus also the professional development of teachers. A.I. and computerization of education has been perceived as an opportunity for development, e.g., of foreign language teachers (Owen, 2019; Dutton & Manuel, 2019). Geng & Liu (2023) developed an online learning community model based on a cascade of social networks and demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting the learning outcomes of foreign language learners. Its cornerstone is the behavioral-cognitive-emotional multi-layered interaction network of the online learning community model, i.e., the bilateral relationships formed between participants are based on three components – behavioral inputs, cognitive inputs, and affective inputs.

### **Legislation on the professional development of teachers in Slovakia**

The recent Act of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic on Pedagogical Employees and Professional Employees, which came in force in 2019, lists several forms of teacher education and professional development of teachers ([zakonypreludi.sk](http://zakonypreludi.sk)). After completing a regular Master's degree, teachers should continue their education and grow professionally throughout their lives. In addition to their own self-education, they can participate in accredited continuing education programs, for which they can receive salary supplements.

The Act also includes other forms of professional development of teachers, such as participation in various courses, workshops and conferences outside the school environment, networking with employees of other schools through online portals, research, observing teaching at other schools or hosting classes with their own colleagues at their school.

As these and other research studies, mentioned in the references of the above-mentioned studies from the last decade show, PLCs represent an important element in the professional development of many professions. Our assumption was that PLCs play an important role in the development of the teaching profession.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The authors of this study analyzed the role of PLCs based on the results from three research studies:

2.1 Meta-analysis of international research studies on teacher development in the 2nd decade of the 21st century, published in journals indexed in WoS and Scopus:

The data acquisition and processing procedure used by the authors was a content analysis of the title, abstract and keywords. The selection criterion was the pedagogical content of the study, i.e. it had

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to be directly related to the teaching profession. The research sample consisted of N=622 pedeutological studies (15,5% of the basic research sample). Content analysis was carried out by coding and categorizing various aspects of the teaching profession, focusing on all areas – teacher training and further development, teacher activity and various other aspects of the teaching profession.

2.2 National survey (2017-2019) on methods of further professional development of teachers in Slovakia:

Data on the further professional development of teachers in Slovakia were collected as part of a broader “Analysis of findings on the state of education in Slovakia” (Hall etl al, 2019). Its goal was to describe the situation and identify the most significant problems in education, their causes, connections and impacts. The analysis was based on extensive qualitative and quantitative research conducted in 2017-2019. The qualitative part of the survey was carried out using the methods of semi-structured individual and group interviews. In total, 421 interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative survey, in which respondents from kindergartens, primary and secondary schools took part. The quantitative survey was conducted via questionnaires. The data came from over 15.000 respondents.

2.3 Survey of teacher’s experiences with their professional development:

The group of respondents consisted only of foreign languages teachers at elementary schools in Slovakia (2022-2023). A sample of N=379 foreign language teachers was selected randomly by sending the questionnaire to all possible respondents. The questionnaire included a wider range of questions about their professional experience and development. For this study, we only selected data on their social learning based on contacts with other professionals.

The benefits and recommendations for practical application of professional lerning communities in the context of schools and school facilities that emerged from the evaluation of the data from the above-mentioned three research studies, are summarized in Chpt. 4.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Results of content analysis of international scientific studies

Our content analysis of selected studies in 2010-2016 showed that 52% of studies were devoted to traditional topics: formal teacher training and education, teacher recruitment, personality, retention, feminization, burnout. The rest (48%) explored new topics such professional relationships (18.1%), the impact of new digital IT (17.3%), the impact of various educational reforms, quality/performance measurements (10.4%), socio-eco-cultural-ethnic background (7.4%), and self-efficacy (2%).

Studies of interpersonal professional relationships of teachers included the following topics:

- Social relations (at the level of the class, school, with the community), joint teaching, discussions, collective research,
- Mentoring during higher education teacher training, entering the profession,
- Impact of ICT on professional relationships (especially online), impact of social networks on development – teachers’ virtual PLC,
- Professional learning communities/teacher 'circles', collective expertise/professional knowledge, shared field notes from teaching.

The results of the analysis show that from our entire sample of 622 pedeutological studies in the years 2010-2016, almost 1/5 of the studies were devoted to PLC and topics related to PLCsc.

**3.2 Results of the national survey** on ways of further professional development of primary and lower secondary school teachers

Table 1 shows the results from the TALIS 2013 as well as data from questionnaires (2019) on how teachers in Slovakia described their professional development. As the Table shows, teachers develop not only through courses or workshops, but also through participation in various professional networks, mentoring, coaching, classroom visits, etc. In Slovakia teachers were less involved in mutual research and less observed the teaching of their colleagues.

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**Table 1.** Forms of further professional development of teachers (2019)

	% teachers in OECD countries	% teachers in SK
Training/courses/workshops	71%	39%
Educational conferences and seminars	44%	25%
Participation in professional networks	37%	34%
Individual/group research on profes. topics	31%	11%
Mentoring, observations, coaching (at school)	29%	40%
Observations/excursions in other schools	19%	4%
Qualification programs	18%	23%
Training in NGOs, public organizations, business	14%	4%
Observations of colleagues in NGOs, public organizations, business	13%	2%

SOURCE: <https://analyza.todarozum.sk>, Tab T\_2.3.3.1

In their answers, the teachers mentioned various ways of further development, from which they benefited. Older teachers nostalgically remembered the so-called ‘methodical days’ which took place even before the split of Czechoslovakia. Their purpose was to unify methodological procedures in teaching, teachers had the opportunity to get to know each other quite well. In some regions of Slovakia, this tradition continues to this day. Their purpose is to share and discuss selected teaching problems. Teachers also mention learning from good practice in other schools; schools learn from each other through observing lessons and other school processes. Teachers learn from each other also at the meetings of subject teachers - within the formal structure of the school.

On the other hand, the current system of continuous education and professional development is based on salary supplements which excessively motivates teachers to participate mainly in activities for “credits”.

### 3.3. Results from a questionnaire survey among foreign language teachers at primary schools

Respondents in our sample of foreign language teachers consider mutual professional contacts with their colleagues (from their school or other surroundings) to be the most effective help/source of their professional growth.

As shown in Graph No.1, foreign language teachers in their reflections on their nonformal continuous education mention several sources of their professional growth. As for self-education, only 5% of them engage in individual studying (e.g. learning from books). But on the other hand, more than 1/3 of them educate themselves through various Internet sites. All other forms of non-formal continuous education the respondents described were essentially based on learning and professional in relational context (relationships with others were included). For the topic of this contribution, the finding that the largest group of respondents clearly learns within the framework of collegial relationships (almost half of them - 48%) is essential. They learn whether from colleagues in their own school or in other schools.

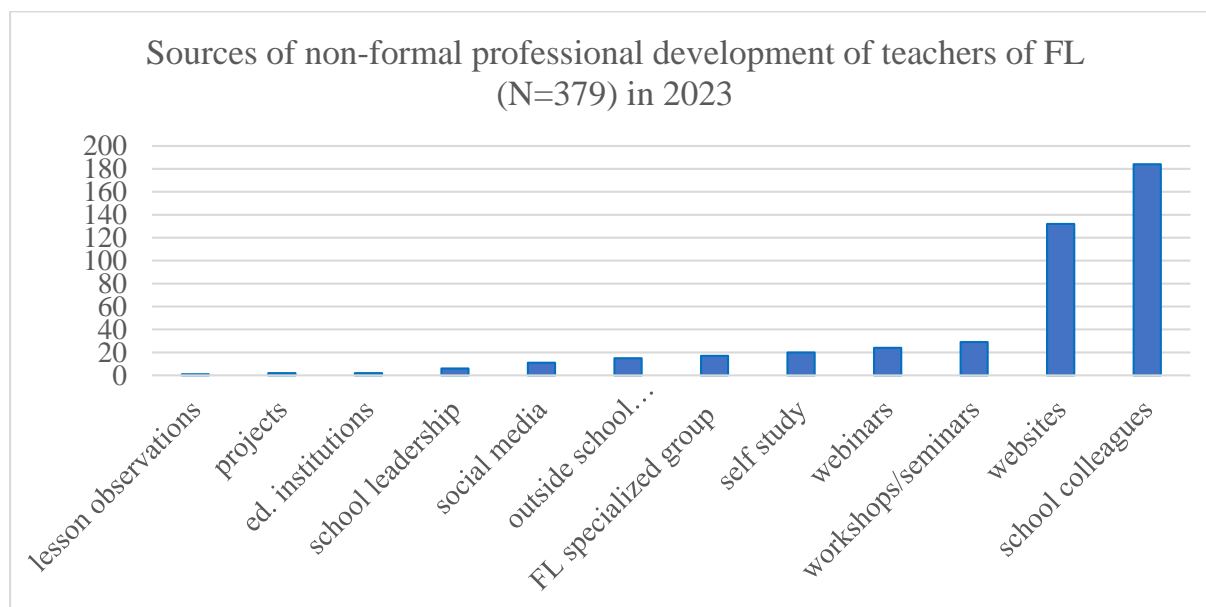
Other methods of professional growth of teachers through education in a wider social context include participation in conferences, seminars and webinars (13%), 5% through meetings of groups of subject

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teachers and methodological training through these formally structured school settings. The rest of respondents learn either on the basis of using the offer of other educational institutions, or on the basis of mentoring by the school management, or through various bilateral projects. The smallest amount of foreign language teachers learn through observing classes taught by other colleagues. This surprising fact may result from the ongoing lack of qualified foreign language teachers and the resulting complications with releasing teachers to observe other colleagues' practice).

**Chart 1.** Sources of non-formal professional development of foreign languages teachers (2023)



SOURCE: Own research (2022-2023)

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we presented three research perspectives on teachers' PLCs, differing partly chronologically (but all since the beginning of the 2nd decade of the 21st century), as well as in the level at which they were implemented - macro, mezzo and micro. At the macro level, we began with global trends in the use of PLCs for non-formal professional development of teachers, while summarizing the global trends in PLCs research studies. We continued with a mezzo-level look at national data on non-formal professional development of teachers, and, finally, we analyzed closely a narrower focused sample of teachers - teachers of foreign languages in primary schools in Slovakia.

From all three sources, based on pedagogical research, the following knowledge about the real meaning of PLCs emerged. PLCs have proven to be a valuable source of professional growth for teachers mainly because they represent an intermediate space between theory and practice.

We found that for all three levels of pedagogical research, PLCs included:

- Joint lesson planning,
- Sharing effective teaching strategies,
- Discussing pedagogical approaches.

As for the specific methods and forms of PLC implementation, there is a whole range available to suit the needs of individual PLCs, such as:

- Non-formal pair/group discussions, 'reading' meetings (discussions about new professional texts),
- 'Methodological (didactic)' days organized by a school subject group supervisor,
- Networking through projects,

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- ‘Teacher rounds’ / or instructional rounds / clinical instructional rounds / quality teaching rounds): these include pre-service and/or in-service teachers (observation – reflection – discussion) - to study teaching and learning across schools and even by districts in order to socialize new teachers (part of university TE).

PLCs contribute to the nonformal development of teachers by enabling:

- Collaboration: Teachers can learn from their colleagues, share innovative practices, and benefit from different perspectives within the community.
- Reflective practice: Teacher reflect on their own teaching methods through the eyes of their colleagues, assess student outcomes together, and make shared decisions based on data to improve instruction.
- Continuous Learning: Teachers engage in ongoing professional conversations and collaborative inquiry. It helps them stay abreast of current research, educational trends, and effective instructional approaches.

In conclusion, if we want to evaluate the importance of PLCs in terms of their purpose, whether for the teachers themselves, their professional growth, or also in terms of a wider impact on school practice, the data from the research studies that we presented show the following advantages:

- Improved instructional procedures result in positive changes – improving the quality of teaching.
- Improved student learning has a positive impact on student learning outcomes (evidence through the analysis of student data and the development of targeted learning interventions).
- Fostered teacher collaboration, shared responsibility - working together, exchange of ideas, and learning from one another's experiences.
- Supportive professional environment: support among teachers, providing opportunities for mentoring, coaching, emotional support, sense of belonging, job satisfaction, reducing feelings of professional isolation - engaging in reflective practice, receiving feedback, and seeking assistance.
- Sustainability and long-term impact: the potential to sustain PLCs impact over time.

Research suggests that PLCs make a significant contribution to teacher effectiveness, instructional quality, and student achievement. By creating a culture of continuous formal but also non-formal professional learning and continuous improvement, PLCs help create a long-lasting positive effect on teacher practice and student outcomes. By promoting a culture of collaboration and reflection, PLCs significantly contribute to the continuous improvement of teaching procedures and, consequently, educational outcomes. The findings presented in this article provide a foundation for further research and implementation of PLCs as an integral element of teacher professional development.

### 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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