Professional Learning Communities: Reflections on Cases in Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates

Osama Al-Mahdi, *Ph.D.*[1], Marloes de Munnik, *Ph.D.*[2], Beatrix Henkel, *Ph.D.*[3], Luke Meinen[4], Marissa Green[5]

[1]*Educational Studies Department, Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain, Bahrain.* 🆔/0000-0002-6997-0430

[2]*MdM Learnscape, The UAE & REAL Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.* 🆔/0000-0001-6379-9188

[3]*Founder of R.A.C.E., The United Arab Emirates.* 🆔/0000-0002-4220-7662

[4]*Riffa Views International School, Bahrain.*

[5]*Innovators Private School, the Sultanate of Oman.* 🆔/0000-0001-5647-5484

Abstract

This chapter explores the different definitions and, characteristics of international and regional research on a professional learning community (PLC) approach. The chapter discusses models of professional development that are used in international educational systems then it reflects on possible ways for adopting these models in the educational context in Bahrain, Oman and The United Arab Emirates. A focus on the educational context in the countries is included with recommendations for the implications thereof on policy and practice. This chapter has two parts: the first is a literature review that synthesizes key ideas, research, and results in the field of PLCs. The chapter thereby is connecting to ideas from a socio-material practice perspective in the field of workplace learning. This results in a focus on professional responsibility, accountability and experience. The second part includes two detailed cases that illustrate how PLCs are translated into learning and teaching practice in two private

schools in Bahrain and Oman, and a third case reflecting on PLC initiatives in The United Arab Emirates.

The chapter recommends promoting a PLC approach in educational systems in the Gulf Council Countries (GCC) and globally by focusing on the following practical implementations: expanding its use in pre- and in-service teacher training programs, adapting PLCs' best international practices to the localized educational context, preparing school principals to lead PLCs in their schools, providing human and financial support to these communities, and working on changing school cultures to become more collaborative by using initiatives such as coaching. A shortage of studies about PLCs, specifically in the GCC region, may lead to a limited spread of improved professional teaching practices applied in GCC schools and the wider network of schools associated with GCC schools. This chapter highlights the importance of a PLC approach and provides examples of how this approach is being used. We suggest that other practitioners, school leaders and researchers may benefit by embracing a PLC approach for increased professional teaching practice, subsequent learner success and improved organizational education outcomes.

Keywords: Teaching practice, teacher professional development, educational policies, PLCs in practice

Introduction

Recently, research on and development of frameworks for teachers' professional development and practices experienced a paradigm shift. This shift was driven by the complexities of teaching and learning requirements, an increased necessity for reforming educational systems, an increased need for accountability and assuring quality learning and teaching outcomes (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). The main feature of these approaches is that they shift professional development beyond merely focusing on a teacher's basic attainment

This is a limited preview of the chapter.

To read the full-text chapter, get access by purchasing this chapter or consider buying the complete book. If your library has subscription to EBSCOhost, the chapter including other chapters of the book can be accessed through your library.

Available via CSMFL Bookstore, Amazon, Google Play Books, EBSCOhost & EBSCO eBooks

References

Al-Mahdi, O. (2019a). Action research and teachers' professional development: Examples and reflections. *International Education Research, 3*(2), 37-46.https://doi.org/10.30560/ier.v2n3p37

Al-Mahdi, O. (2019b). Using action research in teachers' professional development. In S. Sharma & T. Chuanmao (Eds), *Contemporary advances in education* (pp 1-15). CSMFL Publications. https://doi.org/10.21013/97881940692251

Al-Mahdi, O., & Al-Wadi, H. (2015). Towards a sociocultural approach on teachers' professional development in Bahrain. *Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education, 3*(1), 89-100.https://doi.org/10.12785/jtte/030108

Al-Mahdy, Y., & Sywelem, M. (2016). Teachers' perspectives on professional learning communities in some Arab countries. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 5*(4), 45-57. https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2016.1349

Barth, R. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. Jossey-Bass. https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659007453025

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Greenwood, A., Hawkey, K., Ingram, M., Atkinson, A.,& Smith, M. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities*. Research Report 637. Department of Education and University of Bristol.

Carpenter, D. (2015). School culture and leadership of professional learning communities. *International Journal of Educational Management, 29*(5), 682-694. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-04-2014-0046

Chen, P., Lee, C., Lin, H,. & Zhang, C. (2016). Factors that develop effective professional learning communities in Taiwan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(2), 248-265. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1148853

Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76* (8), 597-604. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200622

de Munnik, M. (2020). *Exploring learning for work in the context of digital work technologies: The sociomaterial case of engineering professionals in the construction industry.* [doctoral dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand].

DuFour, R. (2004). What is a professional learning community? *Educational Leadership*, *61*(8), 6-11.

Evers, J., & R. Kneyber (Eds.)(2015). Flip the system: Changing education from the ground up. In A. Hargreaves &M. Fullan, *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school.* Teachers College Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678573

Fenwick, T. (2012). Matterings of knowing and doing: Sociomaterial approaches to understanding practice. In P. Hager, A. Lee& A. Reich (Eds.), *Practice, learning and change: Practice-theory perspectives on professional learning* (pp. 67–83). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4774-6_5

Fenwick, T., & Edwards, R. (2011). Introduction: Reclaiming and renewing actor network theory for educational research. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 43* (sup1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00667.x

Fenwick, T., & Edwards, R. (2016). Exploring the impact of digital technologies on professional responsibilities and education. *European Educational Research Journal, 15*(1), 117–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904115608387

Gamble, J. (2004). *Tacit knowledge in craft pedagogy: A sociological analysis.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Cape Town].

Gamble, J. (2016). From labour market to labour process: Finding a basis for curriculum in TVET. *International Journal of Training Research*, *14*(3), 215–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2016.1254367

Gherardi, S. (2009). Introduction: The critical power of the `Practice Lens'. *Management Learning, 40*(2), 115–128. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507608101225

Hager, P. (2012). Theories of practice and their connections with learning: A continuum of more and less inclusive accounts. In P. Hager, A. Lee, & A. Reich (Eds.), *Practice, learning and change: practice-theory perspectives on professional learning* (pp. 17–32). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4774-6_2

Kyndt, E., Gijbels, D., Grosemans, I., & Donche, V. (2016). Teachers' everyday professional development: Mapping informal learning activities, antecedents, and learning outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 1111-1150. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315627864

Lave, J. (1991). Situating learning in communities of practice. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine, & S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 63–82). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/10096-003

Mindich, D., & Lieberman, A. (2012). *Building a learning community: A tale of two schools.* Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Myers, C.,& Simpson, D. (1998). *Re-creating schools: Places where everyone learns and likes it.* Crowin Press.

Olivier, D., Hipp, K., & Huffman, J. (2010). Assessing and analyzing schools. In K. K. Hipp & J. B. Huffman (Eds.), *Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its best* (pp.29-42). Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Olivier, D.,& Huffman, J. (2016). Professional learning community process in the United States: Conceptualization of the process and district support for schools. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(2), 301-317. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351206198-8

Roy, C. (2016). *A professional learning community with an Arabian twist.* (Master's thesis, Northwestern College, Orange City, IA). http://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters/7/

Schatzki, T. (2001). Introduction: Practice theory. In T. Schatzki, K. K. Cetina, & E. Von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory*(pp.1-14) Routledge.

Seashore, K., Anderson, A., & Riedel, A. (2003). *Implementing arts for academic achievement: The impact of mental models, professional community, and interdisciplinary learning.* Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota. https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/143717/Report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of learning organization.* Doubleday. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930290308

Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline field book: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization.* Doubleday.

Stoll, L., Bolam, R. McMahon, A. Wallace, M., & Thomas. S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change, 7*(4): 221–59. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-006-0001-8

Sun-Keung Pang, N., Wang, T.,& Leung, Z. (2016). Educational reforms and the practices of professional learning community in Hong Kong primary schools. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(2), 231-247. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1148852

Underwood, M. (2015, September 08-11). *Understanding professional community and professional identity through the experiences of Bahraini teachers working with British teachers in a partnership project.*[Paper presentation]. European Conference on Educational Research (ECER): Education and Transition - Contributions from Educational Research, Corvinus University, Budapest.

Vangrieken, K., Meredith, C., Packer, T., & Kyndt, E. (2017). Teacher communities as a context for professional development: A

systematic review. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 61,* 47-59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.10.001

Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education,24(1)*, 80-91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.01.004

Wang, T. (2016). School leadership and professional learning community: Case study of two senior high schools in Northeast China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(2), 202-216. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1148849

About the authors

Dr Osama Al Mahdi is an assistant professor in Bahrain Teachers College [BTC] at the University of Bahrain. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy [FHEA] in the United Kingdom, upon completing the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice [PCAP] Program in York St. John University in 2012. Dr Al Mahdi received his master's degree in Primary Education from the University of Bahrain in 2001, and his Ph.D. in Education from the University of Bristol, the UK in 2009. His areas of expertise include primary education, teacher training and professional development, educational leadership, home-school relationships, social foundations of education, socio-cultural theory, and research methodologies. Dr Al Mahdi is currently mentoring the Continuous Professional Development [CPD] Program in Arabic in the Unit for Teaching Excellence and Leadership [UTEL] at the University of Bahrain.

Dr Marloes de Munnik is a graduate member of the Researching Education and Labour centre [REAL] at the University of the Witwatersrand where she completed her PhD in education and labour in 2020. Her PhD research project focused on learning for work in a changing digital technology context. She works independently as 'MdM learnscape' on multi-stakeholder learning programs, such as work-based learning and upskilling programs. Dr de Munnik has a bachelor's and master's degree in biological science education from the Netherlands and nearly 20 years' experience in teaching, curriculum development and educational leadership. Her areas of expertise and interests include, but are not limited to professional development and innovation, further education and training, teacher training, educational leadership, digital technology in work and learning, socio-material theories and network-based research methodologies.

Dr Beatrix Henkel is a Creative Learning Expert who has been working in the field of education for almost 20 years in roles that varied from classroom teacher to leadership training lead. Dr Henkel has a bachelor's and a master's degree in English language teaching and her PhD research project focused on second/foreign language motivation. She worked in multiple educational contexts, including Hungary, USA, Oman, UAE and is currently employed by the Ministry of Education in the UAE. Dr Henkel is also the founder of R.A.C.E. and the owner of Vision_BH (a collaboration-based company providing creative learning solutions). Her areas of expertise include, but are not limited to leadership coaching, learner autonomy, self-leadership, language learning and instructional design.

Luke Meinen is currently serving Cayman International School as a STEAM Teacher in the Elementary and a Learning Coach in Middle School. Prior to this, he served as the Manager of LEVEL 5, Bahrain where he coordinated events and workshops and facilitated learning experiences for educators and school leaders. This is where he worked to activate the education community in the MENA region through the organization of TeachMeets, collaborative groups and professional learning workshops. Before his time at LEVEL 5, he worked as an elementary educator for eight years in South Korea, Egypt, and Bahrain, designing authentic learning experiences for his classes and colleagues. He enjoys fabrication, playing basketball and spending time with his family in his free time.

Marissa Green is from the USA. She obtained her Bachelor of Science Degree, in Education from the Franciscan University of Steubenville in 1999. Over the past two decades, she has worked in the USA and GCC for the Educational Sector.