

Practices of effective professional learning communities

School resources

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are groups of teachers working together in a collaborative way to inquire into their teaching practice in order to develop it in ways that improve outcomes for students. Research into effective PLCs demonstrates the foundational importance of having a shared vision and values, and a culture based on trust, collaboration, collective responsibility and an inquiry mindset. In addition, there are a number of practices to consider when setting up and working in PLCs to ensure that they lead to teacher learning and improved student outcomes.

Establishing PLC membership and focus

One of the first considerations is who will be part of the PLC. PLCs can vary greatly in terms of their members and the focus of the work. The members of a PLC may decide the focus, or the focus may determine the membership: for example, teachers from within a single department may wish to focus on key knowledge or skills associated with their discipline, or teachers from across the school may choose to work together to improve school-wide literacy. Factors to consider in terms of PLC membership can include how many teachers will be involved, whether or not membership will be mandatory or voluntary, or whether members will be from within the school or involve teachers from a number of schools.

A focus on raising student achievement is a key purpose of PLCs and is important for effective sustainable PLCs. When deciding on a specific focus for a PLC, consider whether to look at a specific subject, such as student achievement on mathematics assessments, or to adopt a general cross-disciplinary focus of improvement, such as literacy or giving effective feedback. It is important for leaders to **ensure there is a clear focus**, as high functioning PLCs depend on the clear communication of expectations from school leaders¹. A focus on assessment and student learning has also been found to increase teacher learning. However, a topic area or goal alone may be insufficient to drive effective PLC work because, without a clearly articulated problem of practice, the development of teachers' learning practice may be limited. It is worthwhile collaborating to **identify problems of practice**² and setting aside time for this in the initial stages.

Implementing clear structures and processes

Once a focus has been identified, the day to day (or session by session) routines need to be established. There are a number of routines that school leaders can implement to enable effective PLCs. Firstly, it is important to **allocate time and space for PLCs**. This should be done in a way that meets the diverse needs of staff, which can include timetabling so that members of a team share the same non-contact time and teach in close proximity to each other. Ensuring that time is made available during school hours also serves to reinforce the importance of PLC work. Leaders can also **provide professional development about PLCs and collaboration**, as it is important for schools and teachers to spend time learning about how effective PLCs operate and how to collaborate³. This training may need to be ongoing.

In high-functioning PLCs, leaders **communicate clear expectations** for the work that occurs during meetings⁴, as teachers' experiences of PLCs can be negative when meetings do not have a clear focus or purpose. For example, when school leaders use PLC time for information sharing rather than the intended focus of improving student outcomes in a specific subject, teachers may feel that the meeting lacks

value. Therefore, as well as an overarching aim, a process and a focus for each meeting can help to drive effective PLC processes.

Administrative tasks within a PLC such as setting times for tasks, monitoring progress, answering questions and providing technical support have been identified as important in well-functioning PLCs, so it is important to **create and maintain routines** for managing the PLC. Some schools use a very clear structure to maintain the focus in PLC meetings, such as three guiding questions and a routine of public question and answer. However, striking a **balance between a set structure and teacher autonomy** may lead to better results and a greater sharing of ideas and collaboration. [Lesson study](#), where teachers are involved in a collaborative problem finding process as they conduct a systematic inquiry into their pedagogical practices, provides a process with embedded teacher autonomy. Lesson study has been shown to lead to an increased focus on students' thinking (rather than a focus on teaching) and increased teacher pedagogical content knowledge.

Promoting effective facilitation

The success of any of the structures or processes outlined above depends on effective facilitation. Teachers' experiences and learning in a PLC can be greatly affected by the competency of their facilitators. The first consideration is deciding whether an **internal or external facilitator** will facilitate the PLC. Often the facilitator is appointed from within the school, and PLCs in high achieving schools have been found to leverage teacher leadership by appointing expert teachers from within their school to lead the PLC. Studies of schools with access to [instructional coaches](#) show that this led to a rapid gain in teacher knowledge and skills, due not only to the expertise of the coaches but also to the existing relationships they had built with staff.

Expert facilitators together with good collaboration lead to the most change in instructional practice. Some of the actions of effective facilitators include:

- **Creating a safe environment** where teachers can freely exchange ideas, ask questions and raise concerns
- **Encouraging participation and critical thinking** by using non-judgmental responses and open-ended questions⁵
- **Knowing the group members**, considering what motivates them, and probing their existing views and beliefs
- **Supporting teachers through mentoring, observations and feedback**⁶, which have been identified as three effective strategies in enhancing teacher professional learning

Supporting collaboration and dialogue

High-functioning PLCs have a culture of collaboration. PLCs may move through a series of stages as they progress from compliance, consultation and cooperation towards genuine collaboration. In the early stages, a PLC may focus more on student learning and engaging in projects. As they progress and develop, teachers may come to focus increasingly on building relationships within the PLC, promoting teacher and team learning, developing a shared vision and values, and purposefully trying to strengthen the team. Professional collaboration involves working towards collective understanding and constructively working on areas of disagreement.

Effective collaboration also relies on discussions of differing ideas and perspectives. While this may lead to conflict, it is important to note that some conflict is healthy as a diversity of thought can help with problem solving, and lead to new learning and innovation⁷. Problems can arise if conflict moves into

personal attacks or personality clashes which lead to an erosion of trust, or if conflict is suppressed, leading to the illusion of agreement. To promote effective collaboration in PLCs:

- **Develop a shared language** that spans departments, subjects and year groups.
- **Focus on a problem of practice to ensure learning.** Be aware of the tendency of PLC participants to avoid critical conversations and conflict in favor of being polite and sharing information.
- **Ensure conversations remain focused** on matters of pedagogy and curriculum rather than becoming sidetracked by topics like student behaviour and discipline.
- **Encourage and support all members to participate**
- **Be aware of the potential for problematic interpersonal relationships and even aggressive behaviour,** which has been reported as one of the toughest challenges in working with peers. Reflect on what may be causing problematic or aggressive behaviour which may, at least in part, be a response to teachers being forced to participate in the PLC or experiencing a lack of support⁸.
- **Encourage multiple perspectives and allow dissensus to occur** in the form of disagreement and critique that acknowledges the tensions inherent in education and embraces problem solving for professional development⁹. Even if teachers do not reach consensus, dissensus allows for engagement with alternate ideas and can lead to learning and growth.
- **Use reflective dialogue,** which is significantly associated with changes to teacher practice. Teachers may need to be supported with reflecting on their work and giving feedback.

Using evidence to inform the work of the PLC

The use of evidence is essential to the work of PLCs. Evidence can encompass data collected from classrooms, student achievement data, and a range of resources such as colleagues, readings and videos. Different resources have been found to impact different aspects of teacher learning¹⁰. **Student learning data**, such as assessment results, student work and behavioral data, can help to change teachers' practice, and data-driven systems are associated with increased student achievement. Surprisingly, there are cases where teachers in well-established PLCs who value improving instruction do not use student achievement data¹¹. In order to effectively use data in PLCs, it is beneficial to:

- **Link data to instruction and use data for more than surface level changes in instruction,** taking care that PLC time does not focus solely on data reporting at the expense of collaboration.
- **Support the development of data literacy,** providing training on how to use data to evaluate instruction and connect data to instructional decisions. Also promote teacher agency in data use.
- **Use data for analysis,** such as evaluating student learning, monitoring progress toward PLC goals, or evaluating the pace of lessons, **and informing action,** such as discussing interventions for students, making decisions about instruction, or setting curricular priorities.
- **Gather data from classroom observation and feedback,** which teachers rate as one of the most effective strategies to support their professional learning¹².
- **Focus on student learning rather than teacher performance** and use student work as a discussion point in PLCs, which can shift teacher talk away from their own instruction and the sharing of fun activities to a focus on what students are thinking and learning¹³. It may also be useful to develop and use common assessment tasks to support conversations about student achievement.

Monitoring the effectiveness of the PLC

In addition to measuring student achievement, other methods can be used to assess the effectiveness of PLCs, although these are often reliant on teachers' perceptions of their own learning¹⁴. When monitoring the effectiveness of PLCs, schools can:

- **Focus on evaluating the impact on student learning** rather than checking to see if mandated practices have been implemented.
- **Use qualitative measures of progress and impact** rather than a quantitative 'tick box' approach¹⁵.
- **Be aware that experienced teachers do not perceive as much learning** as their less experienced colleagues, although they may benefit from the opportunity to share their knowledge with others.
- **Keep a note of attendance and participation**, as there is a correlation between attendance, levels of participation, and teacher learning¹⁶

Recommended further reading

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Endnotes

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15 Carpenter, D. (2017). Collaborative inquiry and the shared workspace of professional learning communities. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31(7), 1069–1091.

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Rachel Cann

Rachel is a PhD student at the University of Auckland. She completed her Master's thesis on the actions that educational leaders can take to help enhance teacher wellbeing. She continues to explore teacher wellbeing for her doctoral studies, in particular using the perspectives of positive psychology and social network theory. Previously, Rachel was a head of science in an Auckland secondary school, and has also led cross-curricular teams of teachers for project-based learning, pastoral care, and teaching as inquiry.