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1. Professional learning communities

1.1. Prelude

The teachers from the first prelude, come together for their first meeting

Cristina: I think everyone's here now, so let's start our meeting.

Willem: Can I ask a question first? I heard that you're going to tell us something about how you can make students do their homework?

Cristina: Well, not exactly... It's not like I'm teaching you. We want to learn about this together.

Tomaž: And how do we do that? I think we should be really clear on how we're going to spend our time. For me it's busy enough as it is.

Rik: That's why we invited Marleen from the teacher training centre to help us get on track and make these meetings as effective as possible.

Marleen: Thanks for inviting me. Maybe discussing how you want to work during, and in between, these meetings would be a good starting point. That way, you all know what to expect and what you want to accomplish.

Barbara: I thought that we could use the meetings to share what we have learned about our experiments with increasing the number of students that do their homework and ask each other for ideas on how to proceed.

Rik: Zooming out, I would like us to agree on the goals of our projects. If you'd ask me, I'd say that the most important thing is to improve our students' learning, and that we are using homework as a lever in achieving just that. Do you agree?

Tomaž: I think I do. Am I right that you said 'projects'? Plural? Does that mean that each participant undertakes his or her own experiment? Or are we working on one joint project?

Marleen: When I talked to Cristina before the meeting, I understood that you intent to conduct individual inquiries – if that's the right word to use – but all circling a joint theme: homework.

Willem: So what we're doing here will be more like a learning community, not a course.

Cristina: Right! And I think Marleen's suggestion of deciding on how to manage our meetings and projects would be a good way to start. It will probably cost us some time at this point, but save us time later on.

Barbara: I've written down the questions that were already asked. Let's go through them and see how far we'll get.

4.2 Introduction

Innovations in education can follow a top-down approach (i.e. starting from school management or from policy makers) or a bottom-up approach (starting from teachers). As can be concluded from chapter 1, more specifically from the stances presented in figure 1, we think that teachers are the most competent decision makers for their own practices. In project Linpilcare, we consequently

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The common conceptual frame of reference of Erasmus+ project Linpilcare



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prefer bottom-up approaches to curriculum innovation and teacher learning. We consider teachers change agents of their own practices. This preference is supported by educational specialists like Fullan (2006) and Van den Berg (2009) who are in general rather sceptical about top-down approaches to innovation in schools. From this line of thought, it seems logical to avoid having teachers working in isolation by creating platforms where teachers share their individual innovation activities, much like design professionals work in what are called 'design studio's'. From the field of software development, Warfel (2009) defines a design studio as "a process, not just a physical place" where "you design or prototype and present to your peers. Your peers critique your work, highlighting the strengths and areas that still need some work." In education, such platforms where teachers meet to share ideas and collect peer feedback, with slight variations in goals and ways of working, can have different names, e.g. communities of practice, professional development communities, teacherlabs, (collaborative) data teams, knowledge communities, etc. In general, these platform can be characterized by a focus on developing professional culture in schools, on teachers' professional development, and on teachers' learning in connection with colleagues (KPC groep, 2011).

In project Linpilcare we prefer talking about 'professional learning communities' (PLC's). Hord (1997) defines a PLC as "a place where teachers inquire together into how to improve their practices in areas of importance to them, and then implement what they learned to make it happen."

For some teachers, the idea of taking charge of their own professional development and curriculum development can be something they're not used to. Willem's initial question in this chapter's prelude suggests that he is expecting Cristina to teach him what he should know. Managing teachers' different expectations from a PLC is obviously something necessary paying attention to.

4.3 Working in PLC's: Shared norms and values

Besides this general description, there is more to say about the typical way of collaborating together in PLC's. Working successfully in a PLC asks for *shared norms and shared values* among the PLC members, at least to a certain degree. The norms (i.e. agreement on aspects of the way of working of the group: starting on time, preparing meetings, etc.) should be discussed in the first meeting(s) and reconsidered later on if necessary.

In the prelude, the members of the newly founded PLC struggle with lots of questions; they are trying to grasp what to expect from the meetings they will have together. They decide to dedicate some time to share these expectations, thereby exploring and setting their shared norms as a PLC.

In addition to shared norms, *shared values* are more than just rules. The members of the PLC must be convinced that working in a PLC offers an adequate approach to improving their practices. Furthermore, they need to establish a culture of trust and of collaboration and to be focused on improving their teaching practices and opening it up to their colleagues.



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Healthy PLC's have a *culture of trust*. Building trust takes time and requires special attention. Teachers must feel confident enough to talk openly about their own practice. Since many teachers are used to work alone in their classrooms most of the time, opening up their practice to colleagues is not part of daily routines. A second aspect of sound PLC's is that they have a *culture of collaboration*. Teachers who are members of the PLC must be willing to cooperate with the other members, becoming each other's critical friends. A culture of trust is a necessary requirement for a culture of collaboration to evolve. This also implies a high level of responsibility and engagement from all the members (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Stoll et al., 2006). To realize shared responsibility it is necessary that the members have influence on the process of the meeting and the outcomes. (Verbiest, 2003). While being a participant, or a member, of a PLC, teachers work on improving *their own teaching practice* and on helping the other PLC members improve theirs. In other words, working in PLC's is aimed at having an *impact* on practice. Because teachers share their professional ideas with their critical PLC friends, their individual practices are '*deprivatized*', i.e. opened up to the critical observations of their colleagues.

4.4 Added value of working in PLC's

Starting PLC's and giving teachers time and opportunities to join a PLC is an investment for schools so it must be clear for the potential PLC members as well as school management what the added value of PLC's are to school practice. Nancy Fichtman Dana (and Yendoll-Hoppey, 2008) mentions four benefits of professional learning communities:

1. They reduce isolation: Corresponds with the 'deprivatization' characteristic mentioned in the previous paragraph.
2. They lead to shared purpose: When teachers work together in PLC's they construct a better understanding of their work and of their students' learning. All the members of the PLC help each other to learn as much as possible.
3. They spark professional conversations: When colleagues are together during lunch breaks, conversations are not always about work. In teacher meetings, many topics are on planning and organization. A PLC adds, what Dana calls, 'real' conversations. A real conversation is about the authentic problems of teachers and about improving student learning. A real conversation is on professional matters and is aimed at digging deeper into a topic to gain a thorough understanding of the matter at hand. The use of 'protocols' can promote real conversations.
4. Making school data meaningful: Schools collect a lot of 'data' as part of daily practice. Student work, for instance, can be considered data about their performance. There are a lot of data that can be really helpful for teachers to gain insights into their teaching practice and triggering ideas to improve it. PLC meetings can help teachers in learning to use these data.



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4.5 Different Types of PLC

There are many ways for people to work and learn in a PLC. In project Linpilcare, we advocate 'inquiry-oriented' PLC's. Nancy Fichtman Dana (and Yendoll-Hoppey, 2008, p. 56) defines this kind of PLC as "a group of teaching professionals who meet regularly to learn from practice through structured dialogue and engage in continuous cycles of inquiry". Furthermore, she distinguishes three types of inquiry-oriented PLC's: PLC that are focused on:

1. A 'shared inquiry': all PLC members work together on conducting a single inquiry, they all have an interest in, because it concerns their professional practice.
2. An 'intersecting inquiry': when all PLC members have an interest in the same topics, but each conducts his/her own inquiry based on this topic. The topic is defined by all the members of the PLC group, the inquiry processes, outside the PLC meetings, are basically individual.
3. A parallel inquiry: when all PLC members conduct individual inquiries on individually chosen topics.

The type of PLC influences the collaboration of the PLC members. In a shared PLC all the members are involved in the same inquiry with the same inquiry question. It could be easier for the PLC members to contribute to the inquiry. All members could, for example, bring data to the PLC meeting from their own classrooms, consequently establishing rich images of the practices at hand, including their similarities and differences. By doing so, it is very easy to really get a grasp of the content of the inquiry during PLC meetings. There are however also some disadvantages of a shared inquiry: there is always a risk that the topic and inquiry process are not (fully) the concern of all the members. This could be harmful to the involvement and professional learning of these PLC members.

The advantage of parallel inquiry is that all the members of the PLC choose topics that they are (likely) really committed to. There is also a risk: the absence of involvement on the content of inquiry can cause a lack of interest in the inquiry of others and therefore less motivation to contribute.

An intersecting PLC, as a middle ground between the other types of PLC's, seems to be preferable in a lot of cases: there is a balance between engagement on content and distance to be a critical friend, there is a shared topic, but with individual corresponding questions.

The teachers in the prelude are about to decide on what kind of PLC they would really want. In answer to Tomaž' question ("Does that mean that each participant undertakes his or her own experiment? Or are we working on one joint project?"), Marleen describes an intersecting inquiry oriented PLC: "I understood that you intend to conduct individual inquiries – if that's the right word to use – but all circling a joint theme: homework."



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The choice of which kind of PLC you start is really a discussion between the PLC members. It's good to be open and transparent in discussing the pros and cons of the different types of PLC's and on deciding which type of PLC fits your situation best. It is of course essential that all the group members agree on the type of PLC to start.

4.6 Starting a PLC

A major resource in the process of starting a PLC is the confirmation of a PLC facilitator. It is advisable to nominate an experienced PLC member to plan and lead the meetings. The first step is to arrange the necessary resources for the teachers to meet each other. The teachers must have time to visit the meetings and there must be a physical space to meet. In between the meetings the teachers must be able to work on the inquiry.

Gathering the group

The ideal situation in forming a PLC is selecting teachers for a PLC who applied on voluntary base. Teachers who are forced to participate are not always willing to learn and can frustrate the professional dialogue and the learning process. There is also the risk the PLC will be known as a group of teachers who are not functioning very well. Focusing on willing people is one of the crucial factors in starting PLC's

Setting norms

When new groups are formed the group may be described as separate entities who have nothing very much in common. To promote real collaboration between the group members it is important to build a common frame of reference of working in PLC's. It can be helpful to start by setting norms together and to discuss and agree the ways of working together. Shared norms and values are important for the development of a culture of trust and effective PLC's.

Discuss the type of plc

When members are involved in the process of choosing the type of PLC where they are participating in, the expectations of the PLC meetings, the outcomes and the motivation of the PLC members will need to be managed.

Facilitating PLC's

Maybe the most crucial factor in making a PLC effective is a person who takes of facilitating the PLC meetings and has adequate skills to do this. In facilitating PLC's there are different choices that need to be made.

Leadership

The PLC facilitator is a central person in the community. S/he plans and organises the meeting. An effective facilitator will be able to use different styles when needed and has the capacity to be a real leader. Some of the characteristics of such a leader: (s)he can inspire the PLC members, (s)he



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can motivate, (s)he has a vision on the effectiveness of working in PLCs, (s)he can take decisions, etc.

Engagement on the content or on the process.

There can also be a relationship between being an effective facilitator and the type of PLC. There are two types of PLC facilitators: facilitators that are really engaged in the process of how a PLC functions and facilitators that are really engaged in the content of the PLC. Both types of facilitators can be very helpful for the progression of the PLC but it is also important to understand the weaknesses of both types of facilitator focuses. Facilitators who are primarily focused on the *content* of the PLC inquiries are probably really committed to what is discussed in the PLC. On the other hand, the focus on content could also lead to paying less attention to the *process* of discussion in the PLC. This can be the other way round for facilitators focused primarily on the PLC process.

Structure time, use protocols, make planning

One of the main tasks of the facilitator in a PLC is to make a plan for the whole inquiry cycle e.g. a whole school year. In doing so they will structure the inquiry process by determining the main focus for the different meetings during the cycle. Another task of the PLC facilitator is managing the time during the PLC meetings. To bring meaning to a PLC meeting the facilitator can also use his/her leadership capacity by selecting and using appropriate protocols. A particular feature of protocols is that they specify interactions between the communicating entities. The entities in this case are the PLC members and the communication is about the inquiry process or the content of the inquiry. Protocols are a way of structuring the conversation during meetings with a fixed time path intended to deepen the analyses. Other benefits of using protocols are as follows.

- It helps members to stay on topic during discussions
- It helps members talk in a collegial, effective way
- it helps to use time effectively during meetings.