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## Teachers and principals' assessment of schools as professional learning communities in a district in the North-West Province of South Africa

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**Abstract.** As researchers continue to seek strategies to bring systemic change in schools, many have turned to professional learning communities due to the valuable possibilities that these communities offer in reforming schools. The study aims to analyse how teachers and principals in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the North-West Province of South Africa perceive their schools as professional learning communities. A quantitative approach was used to sample 87 schools for this study. Questionnaires were given to 1,260 teachers and principals in this district. The questionnaire was based on the conceptual framework of professional learning communities. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software program was used to analyse the data. Assessing schools as professional learning communities remains a significant way to re-examine educational institutions to determine their performance outcome. The main findings included respondents who strongly agreed to all the core components ranging from 21% (Supportive conditions – structures) to 28% (Shared supportive leadership and Supportive conditions – relationships). Respondents who agreed with all the core components rated all the components above 50% and ranged from 55% (Supportive conditions – structures) to 65% (Additional statements). While respondents who disagreed ranged from 9% to 18%, respondents who strongly agreed only ranged from 1% to 6%. Principals rated their schools as professional learning communities more than the teachers. This study also established other problems facing educational institutions in this district, adding to those already highlighted by previous researchers. Schools should be encouraged to use this self-assessment method for their respective evaluations. This article is intended mainly for teachers and principals and all those who are involved in schools' reconstruction, including the Ministry of Education

**Keywords:** collective creativity; shared supportive leadership; shared values and vision; school improvement

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## INTRODUCTION

South Africa's education system is still transitioning from the former racially divided education system to the all-inclusive education system where schools are open to all racial groups. As politicians, researchers and ordinary South Africans continue to demand improvement of learners and teachers' school performance, this time employing professional learning communities (PLCs) to determine how teachers and principals assess their schools.

J. Zhang *et al.* (2023) define PLCs as a group of people sharing and employing their practices in an ongoing, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth-promoting way. D. Nkengbeza (2017), however, believes that PLCs are inclusive education institutions that are continuously and collectively questioning the status quo, seeking better means to improve their institutions. PLCs offer teachers real opportunities to improve. Allowing teachers to assess themselves will provide them with an opportunity for self-improvement. In South Africa, some teachers tend to be satisfied with their learners' performance and therefore deem change as unnecessary. Introducing the concept of continuous inquiry in schools will eliminate this perception. O. Avidov-Ungar *et al.* (2023) noted that PLC as a term has been frequently mentioned in many educational discourses. They define a PLC as a group of colleagues who seek new, better ways to address challenges, set new goals and create approaches to achieve them. D.H.L. Lee and N.K.K. Ip (2023) believe that PLC has a highly positive influence on teacher leadership skills. According to them, when teachers employ PLC skills in their classroom activities, both teachers' leadership skills and learners' performance improve. PLCs have been recognized for their efforts in reducing the isolation of teachers and learners – a community that is driven by shared goals and purpose. O. Avidov-Ungar and R. Konkes Ben Zion (2019) stated that PLCs do achieve ongoing professional development and greater pupil attainment. According to M. Antinluoma *et al.* (2018), PLCs influence teachers, teacher learning, school processes, and pedagogical processes for both teachers and students. PLCs increase the commitment of all stakeholders to the school's vision and goals and Principals facilitate the operation of PLCs in their schools by providing the necessary conditions and participating in PLC meetings (Antinluoma *et al.*, 2021). P. Johannesson (2022) notes that even though much has been researched on PLC and its effects on school improvement, there is still a need to address principals' and teachers' evaluation of their PLC activities. These types of studies were not conducted in the Northwest Province of South Africa. The study aims to determine how teachers and principals assess their schools as PLCs.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Quantitative research method

In this study, quantitative data were collected to obtain a complete image of the situation in schools in a whole district in the North-West Province of South Africa.

### Selection of the district and schools

The district was selected using the convenient sampling method. This district was selected due to its proximity to the researchers. The convenient sampling method was thus selected because of "accessibility" (Kumar, 2014). Concerning "geographical location", the researchers were based in the same district, and even though they had to commute great distances to distribute the questionnaires, the distance would have been greater if a different district had been selected. The duration for distributing the questionnaires would have also increased. There are 225 primary and secondary schools currently in Dr Kenneth Kaunda District (Official website of the North West..., 2023). The Department of Education aided in the distribution of the questionnaires. Only 87 schools returned the questionnaires consisting of 64 principals and 1196 teachers making a total of 1260 respondents. This data was collected in 2015, but due to some challenges, the writing of the articles was not completed.

### Data collection method: Questionnaires

The data were collected employing questionnaires. There were two separate questionnaires for teachers and principals. The questionnaires were constructed from the essential practical components of PLC (Lee *et al.*, 2011; Nkengbeza, 2017). This type of questionnaire had been used by previous researchers, such as D.F. Olivier and K.K. Hipp (2010), but it was modified for the South African school context. The questionnaire comprised two sections. Section A consisted of respondents' and schools' information, and Section B consisted of statements on the core components of PLCs. Seventy-one (71) questions/statements are divided into seven sections: shared supportive leadership, collective creativity, shared values, and vision etc. A four-point Likert scale was used. The only difference between the questionnaires for teachers and principals was in Section A, where the principals were asked for additional information, such as the school location, the level of the school, and the number of learners and teachers in the school. The targets were 100 schools and 1,000 teachers. To meet the aforementioned targets, the questionnaires were provided to all schools (Gr. 1 to 12) in the district. The questionnaires were printed and put in envelopes addressed to the respective school principals. The Department of Education offices helped distribute the questionnaires to the respective schools in their areas. Even though the schools were reminded to collect the questionnaires from their area offices and to return them to the same office or the organizers' office, only 87 schools returned their questionnaires. A total of 1 260 teachers and principals completed the questionnaires. All the above procedures were in line with the suggestions of N. Matović and K. Ovesni (2023).

### Ethical considerations

The research was approved by the research and ethics committees of North West University. The Department of Education also provided a letter of approval to conduct the research in the selected district. Meetings were held with all the area managers of the district to explain the study aim and questionnaire distribution and advise on how

they could help distribute the questionnaires. This line of communication was kept throughout the data collection process as they could also remind the principals of various schools to collect and/or return the questionnaires. Each principal received a letter with step-by-step instructions on how to collect the questionnaires at the area office, distribute them to the teachers, and return the questionnaires to the area office. A consent letter was sent to the principals, teachers, and the school governing boards' (SGB) chairpersons. These consent letters explained explicitly the study aim, where the research was to take place, the potential risks, and benefits of participating in this research, the confidentiality of respondents' data, and participants' right to withdraw, among others. Participants were provided with cell phone and office telephone numbers, email address of one of the professors was also included. Further questions were directed to these contacts. The principals, teachers and the SGBs' chairpersons were asked to sign the consent letters. This was done, and the letters were returned together with the questionnaires.

#### Research validity and reliability

This study used content validity – how the study is designed from data collection, data analysis, findings and conclusion are all valid and the research questions have been answered. Face validation was also used. Teachers' assessment of their schools as PLCs is not only a current issue in educational research but also an alternative to school improvement strategies. These valid questionnaires helped to answer two major research questions. All the measurement mechanisms in this study are reliable (margin of error, research methodology, data collection, analysis, findings, and conclusion).

#### Data analysis and presentation

The data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Factor analysis and reliability, reliability, descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANOVA were performed. Cronbach's alpha was greater than 0.80 in all the core components (excellent). Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) was used to determine Cronbach's alpha. As shown below, this measurement demonstrated variable correlation. As explained by J.R. Hair *et al.* (1998), the range of the index was from 0 to 1 (when it is 1, it means that each variable is perfectly predicted by the other):

- ≥ 0.80: meritorious
- ≥ 0.70: middling
- ≥ 0.60: mediocre
- ≥ 0.50: miserable
- < 0.50: unacceptable.

Cronbach's alpha for each component was as follows: Shared supportive leadership – 0.93; collective creativity – 0.92; shared values and vision – 0.90; shared personal practice – 0.90; supportive conditions – relationships – 0.86; supportive conditions – structures – 0.85; and 0.89 for additional statements supporting PLCs.

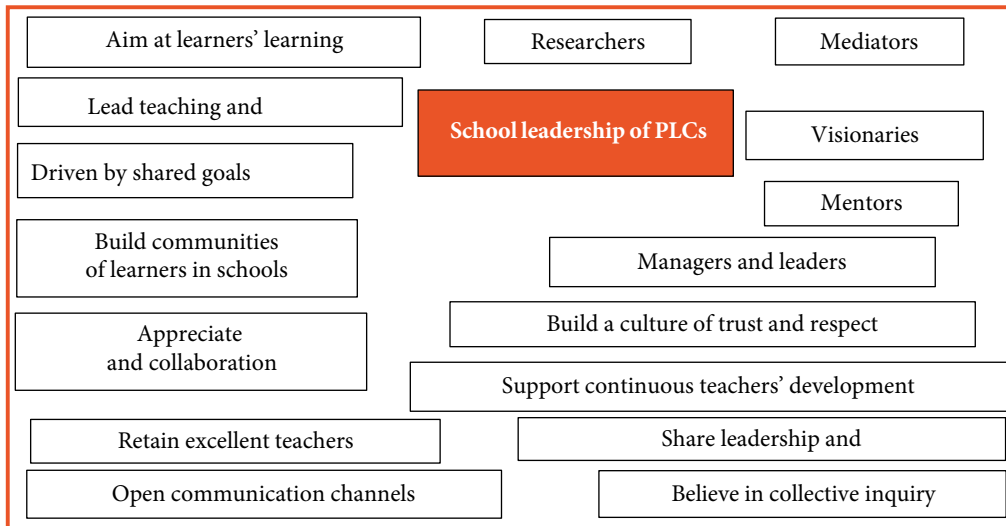
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

J.C.-K. Lee *et al.* (2011) noted that teachers' psychological attachment to the teaching profession has also been

improved in PLCs. O. Avidov-Ungar and R. Konkes Ben Zion (2019) demonstrated that principals who took part in the study had improved their leadership skills. According to them, participating in PLC activities at the school improves teachers' pedagogical leadership skills and learners' performance. F. Huijboom *et al.* (2019) noted that lasting change can be achieved in schools through the establishment of PLCs. While L. Ni *et al.* (2023) define PLCs as schools where teachers are engaged in reflective practice, problem-solving, and expanding educators' views, V. Vescio *et al.* (2008) argue that PLCs help remove the negative behaviour that some teachers and learners bring to schools and positively impact the school teaching processes. K. Thornton and S. Cherrington (2019) concluded that even though PLCs bring a lot of positive change in schools, they believe that more still has to be done on the establishment of PLCs in elementary schools.

Many researchers, such as J. Zhang *et al.* (2023) and others in the field of education leadership, like P. Hallinger (2011) and S. Huber (2010), agree that the principal is at the centre of any change within the school. In other words, the principal determines whether or not there will be change. Every principal has to accept and create a collegial relationship between all the stakeholders in the school – a key determinant of change within an institution (Nkengbeza 2017). This collegiality with other stakeholders and other factors gives teachers the ability to respond to the needs of learners. The principal has to create teams in schools and provide development opportunities through ongoing professional development. Such an environment makes it possible for both learners and teachers to learn in an ongoing collective manner, supported by trust and respect (Hunter, 2013).

As suggested by T. Brighouse and D. Woods (2008), the principal should lead and manage the school at all levels. No school will develop into a mature PLC if the learning environment is not conducive for learners and teachers. Teaching and staff development should be a priority. F. Huijboom *et al.* (2019) explain that PLCs believe in community: they appreciate dialogue in collaboration and a culture of inquiry. The principal has to create conditions for this to take place in the school. Principals and heads of departments are potentially important role players who can improve the dedication of teachers towards professional growth and PLCs (Heystek, 2014). D. Nkengbeza (2017) provides an overview of several attributes principals should possess to improve PLCs in schools in Figure 1. These visionary leaders (principals) operate as mentors, and mediators and succeed by building trust and respect in the whole school. They believe in shared leadership and management, collective enquiry and provide supportive conditions for all staff. They maintain open communication channels, retain excellent teachers and appreciate dialogue and collaboration, driven by shared goals. The leadership provides a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning (Nkengbeza, 2017).



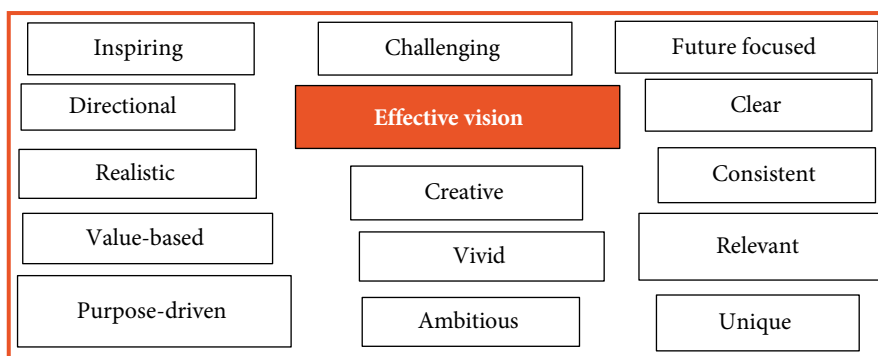
**Figure 1.** Attributes of school leadership of PLCs

Source: D. Nkengbeza (2017)

Collective creativity is at the core of PLC. It helps increase the school's continuous learning capabilities and brings the stakeholders together to continuously question their actions and come up with better means or tools to solve school problems and improve teaching and learning for both staff and learners (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Through collective learning, the stakeholders, especially the principal and teachers, learn new ideas and better methods to solve problems and improve teaching methods for the benefit of the learners (Hord, 1997a). J. Hunter (2013) believes the principal has to guide and develop collective intelligence in every PLC. According to J.L. Snow-Gereno (2005), PLCs negate teachers' isolation from the community, thus, a "shift to collaboration and questioning in communities". However, according to A.-M. Dooner *et al.* (2008), teachers should be aware of

the challenges faced in the process of collaboration. They state that individual actions ought to lead to shared goals for effective collaboration to succeed. In their opinion, to develop into a learning community, there is a need for mutual engagement that will "generate honest interactions, [ask] challenging questions and [receive] constructive feedback".

Every organisation is shaped by its values and visions. The school's values provide the binding norms of behaviour for all the stakeholders, including learners (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Any school's vision is an important part of shaping the school as it helps to direct the school policies. A vision provides a sense of direction for all the stakeholders in every educational institution. J. Hunter (2013) believes that, without the direction provided by the vision, most PLC implementations will eventually fail (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Characteristics of an effective vision

Source: D. Nkengbeza (2017)

Figure 2 above provides the characteristics of an effective vision. R. Constandse (2012) and G. Ambler (2013) state that an effective vision is directional, realistic, inspiring, and also challenging and creative. They believe that an effective vision should be clear, consistent and, of course,

unique, relevant, and future-focused. This type of vision is ambitious, values-based, and purpose-driven.

V. Vescio *et al.* (2008) believe that collective enquiry by teachers makes it possible to create a new vision of "what, when, and how teachers should learn". They argue that by

integrating teachers' development into a community of practice, learners' needs will be met. V. Vescio *et al.* (2008) and A. Harris *et al.* (2017) agree that shared values and norms/visions that focus on learners' learning will create an environment for continuous enquiry, which will subsequently improve learners' achievement.

Supportive conditions, as explained by S.M. Hord (1997b), are determined by how and when the staff in a unit usually come together to solve problems and review its school improvement strategies, goals, and challenges. Supportive conditions are either structural or relational (Nkengbeza 2017). Structural conditions include time to meet and talk, school size, the proximity of staff, good communication among the stakeholders, and teachers' development or empowerment, among others (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, the collegial relationships between the staff and between all the stakeholders include the possibility for the staff to improve teaching and learning in the school together, supported by trust and respect among all the stakeholders, especially among teach-

ers, learners, and between teachers and learners. These relationships create a conducive environment for continuous enquiry to occur and for the community to be transformed into a community of learners (Harris *et al.*, 2017).

Shared personal practice is another core component of PLCs. This component is determined by how peers share their practice and receive feedback. Teachers visit each other's classrooms and learn from each other (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). The feedback from colleagues is genuinely given and received. According to D. Nkengbeza (2017), shared personal practice should be a non-evaluative, peer-helping peer, and guided by respect, genuine communication and understanding. Since shared personal practice fosters group learning, brainstorming will be quite helpful in a learning organisation.

Table 1 presents the analysis of responses to the statements on the core components of PLCs. The analysis is on seven components of PLCs as used in the questionnaires. A four-point Likert scale was used: 1 = Strongly Agree (SA), 2 = Agree (A), 3 = Disagree (D), and 4 = Strongly Disagree (SD).

**Table 1.** Principals and Teachers' frequency and percentage

Principals / Teachers	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Frequency	Cumulative percentage
Principals	64	5.08	64	5.08
Teachers	1196	94.92	1260	100

**Source:** compiled by the authors

Table 1 above shows that the majority of the respondents were teachers (94.92%) and the principals made up only 5.08%. Sixty-four (64) principals and 1196 teachers

(total number of participants = 1260) completed the questionnaires. Table 2 demonstrates teachers' and principals' perceptions of their schools as PLCs.

**Table 2.** Analysis of teachers' and principals' combined responses

Statement Scale	SA	A	D	SD
1. Shared supportive leadership	28%	57%	12%	3%
2. Collective creativity	27%	58%	13%	2%
3. Shared values and vision	27%	63%	9%	1%
4. Shared personal practice	27%	62%	10%	1%
5. Supportive conditions – relationships	28%	58%	12%	2%
6. Supportive conditions – structures	21%	55%	18%	6%
7. Additional statements	23%	65%	10%	2%

**Source:** compiled by the authors

The total number of respondents in Table 2 who "strongly agreed" with the statements on the core components of PLCs ranges from 21% to 28%. The lowest number (21%) is in the supportive conditions (structures), and the highest (28%) is in shared supportive leadership and supportive conditions (relationships). An equal number of respondents "strongly agreed" with the statements concerning collective creativity, shared values, and vision, and shared personal practice. Fewer (55%) respondents "agreed" with the statements on the core components (supportive conditions – structures). The highest percentage (65%)

agreed with the additional statements. It is recommended that another study be conducted to investigate how supportive conditions (structures) in schools can be improved.

While the number of respondents who "disagreed" with the statements on the core components of PLCs was the lowest in shared values and vision (9%), the highest number (18%) was in the component of supportive conditions (structures). The number of respondents who "strongly disagreed" was the lowest on the scale and ranged from 1% to 6%. This is a significant indication of PLCs' performance in the schools.

The above findings correspond with the views of V. Vescio *et al.* (2008). They presented how learners' performance was just about average before PLCs were introduced in the school. When PLCs were introduced in the school, learners' performance improved rapidly, with more than 80% of learners meeting grade-level standards. In another case by V. Vescio *et al.* (2008), learners' performance in standardised test ratings went from 50% to 90% of students who passed each subject after when PLC was introduced in their school. The findings are also similar

to those of Y.J.A. Khasawneh *et al.* (2023). They emphasized that productive school leadership that does not just support but also nurtures and values collaboration is very crucial in building a professional learning community in a school. D. Nkengbeza and J. Heystek (2017) conducted a survey, in which respondents who agreed and those who strongly agreed was more than 80%. Comparing the average values for principals and teachers in Table 3, principals rated their schools as PLCs more than the teachers in all the core components.

**Table 3.** A comparison of principals' and teachers' responses

PLCs components	Mean		MST	Variance schools	Parameters	Effect size
	principal	teachers				
Shared supportive leadership	1.705	1.908	.198	.038	.001	0.42
Collective creativity	1.801	1.909	.181	.032	.053	0.23
Shared values and vision	1.770	1.862	.186	.008	.102	0.20
Shared personal practice	1.795	1.862	.199	.038	.258	0.14
Supportive conditions – relationships	1.823	1.888	1.208	.043	.283	0.13
Supportive conditions – structures	2.041	2.106	.228	.046	.302	0.12
Additional statements	1.845	1.919	.226	0.045	.238	0.14

**Source:** compiled by the authors

The effect size in the shared supportive leadership component is statistically significant (0.42 – medium effect). For collective creativity and shared values and vision, the effect sizes were also statistically significant, but with small effects (0.23 and 0.20 respectively). This is an indication that teachers are more critical of the functioning of PLCs in schools, and this is a component that promotes debate and helps build continuous enquiry in schools. In a similar study by S.C. Thompson *et al.* (2004), principals, similar to “U2”, rated teachers higher in collective learning. As noted, team meetings were attended, and PLC objectives were discussed alongside teachers' expectations. The principal meets with learners and lets them know what to do. Principals brainstorm how certain concepts can be taught differently during meetings with teachers, and they use professional development sessions to bring people together.

Few respondents commented in each section; however, these comments provided some insight into the quantitative data to better understand the potential issues. The discussion focuses on the South African context since the data had to be interpreted in the context of the respondents. As shown in Table 2, 55% of the respondents “agreed” with the statements on all the core components, which was a good sign as it indicated that these schools were heading in the right direction. Moreover, respondents who “strongly agreed” and those who “agreed” with the statements on the core components of PLCs made up more than 80% of each component. PLCs have been linked to improved learner performance in schools. To some extent, it explains why the North-West province has been successful in the matric exams. According to the 2014 matric results, the North-West province was the second in the country (84.6%) and the district selected for this study scored more than 83%

(Matshediso, 2015).

The positive attitude reflected by the “strongly agree” and even the matriculation results need some contextual perspectives. The Annual National Assessment (ANA) results for Grades 1 to 9 demonstrate a different situation for the district in which the research was conducted. The score of schools in the North-West Province in all the tests for Grades 1 to 9 is lower than the average of all nine provinces (Department of Basic Education, 2014). It is therefore important to reflect the statistical data against the qualitative comments in this project as well as related research in South Africa.

Table 2 above shows that, while 21% to 28% of the respondents “strongly agreed” with the statements on all the core components of PLCs, only 1% to 6% of the respondents “strongly disagreed”. Table 2 indicates that teachers are less positive about the supportive leadership in schools. The qualitative comments concur with these sentiments – for example, that there must be more support from the governing body, and that there is not sufficient collaboration from the governing body. Five teachers reported that the principal made all the decisions and communicated to the rest of the staff during staff meetings without seeking the opinions of the teachers, stating that “democracy is still not fully practised” and that “key people decide on everything”. According to these teachers, some heads of departments (HoDs) did not meet regularly, and some did not do their jobs well as they also taught. A similar sentiment is also espoused by S.R. Naicker, and R. Mestry (2013) while J. Heystek (2014) indicated that principals do not always get the support of teachers. According to J. Heystek (2014), principals find it difficult to decide and also lack collaboration in changing underperforming schools.

It seemed as if the collective approach did not work well, because business owners and some parents did not attend parents' meetings, and some parents did not support their children. Most parents in township schools did not visit the school or listen to learners' problems. SGBs did not motivate parents and much work had been left in the hands of teachers and principals. Only teachers, and not all the stakeholders, were working together. Parents were not committed enough to teaching the children basic values – parents expected the teachers to do it. Some teachers still worked individually with little collaboration. The findings support the views of other researchers, such as B.D. Bantwini (2012), stating that teacher commitment and professional conduct are a problem in many schools, specifically in rural and township schools. L. Ni *et al.* (2023) suggested that where there is isolation of teachers, Professional Development should be provided to encourage teacher collaboration and the development of their networks.

Even though most comments were positive, there was a perception that some learners were not living up to the school values, like respect for teachers. One teacher expressed that, “there is disrespect of educators by learners in some schools”, which indicates that all role players still do not have one common vision. The problems with collaboration expressed in the previous section are an indication that all role players are not fully committed to the visions of their schools.

The supportive conditions concerning the structures that focus on infrastructure and management structures were the one component that received the most negative responses (Table 1). This is understandable in the South African context, where many schools, specifically in rural areas (as in the North-West province), do not have sufficient facilities such as electricity and water. Basic equipment, for example, computers and books, are not readily available in many schools, hence the following comments were expected (Statistics South Africa, 2014). Respondents in some schools said that more computers and photocopiers were needed to enhance teaching and learning. There

were no laboratories, libraries, whiteboards, or interactive boards in the classrooms and in some schools, the number of classrooms was limited. In some schools, technology was not readily available, while improvements to school facilities were needed in other schools.

Other means of communication should be developed to save time going to the principal's office. Parents were not supportive due to long distances to schools and illiteracy. R. Ahmeda and Y. Sayed (2009) indicate that these structural problems can be linked to leadership problems when decisions are made behind closed doors and communicated to others during staff meetings, which evoke teachers' frustration. The respondents were further of the opinion that complaints from teachers were not taken seriously or investigated. Some teachers could not use the Internet due to a lack of technological knowledge. Some parents did not even collect their children's progress report cards. While two schools complained about the non-existence of any good school building, many agreed that there should be professional development more than once a year.

While some teachers noted shared personal practice, although with limited or no feedback, others complained that too much work for teachers had left them with no time to share their practices.

Other problems listed by teachers and principals included a need to improve content teaching and the problem that teachers in rural areas transferred every year. As a result, learners have no teachers for up to three months at the beginning of the year. Two teachers also said that classrooms were overcrowded and that it “kills teachers' moral(e)”. Four teachers said they had not been given the required support but were only pressurised. The improved relationship with the area managers was appreciated.

Supportive conditions (the structures component) had the lowest number of those who “strongly agreed” (21%) and “agreed” (55%) and, on the other hand, the highest number of respondents who “disagreed” (18%) and “strongly disagreed” (6%) (Table 4, 5).

**Table 4.** Statement B59: There is enough time during the official school hours for teachers to work together

B59	Frequency	Cumulative Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Percent
1	216	17.53	216	17.53
2	605	49.11	821	66.64
3	331	26.87	1152	93.51
4	80	6.49	1232	100

**Note:** Frequency Missing = 28

**Source:** compiled by the authors

**Table 5.** Statement B61: Teachers in their departments have the opportunity to make recommendations to the SGB about the selection of new teachers

B61	Frequency	Cumulative Percent	Cumulative Frequency	Percentage
1	140	11.61	140	11.61
2	537	44.53	677	56.14
3	385	31.92	1062	88.06
4	144	11.64	1206	100

**Note:** Frequency Missing = 54

**Source:** compiled by the authors

As can be seen in Tables 4 and 5, statements B59 and B61 above, participants' positive responses were relatively lower than in other components. On the other hand, the negative responses were high (31.9% disagreed with statement B59). Although the opportunity to make recommendations to the SGB is not a physical structural problem, as finance for professional development, it was indicated that there are problems with interaction and people. If teachers cannot develop and do not have the opportunity or ability to influence the structures, it will certainly continue to cause problems for the teachers in their learning communities. Understandably, there is not sufficient technology available for teachers, since many of the schools do not have sufficient electricity or infrastructure for electronic equipment (for example, no safe place to store electronic equipment), and most of the time, these schools have no extra funding to purchase more or better technological equipment.

Although the data could be somewhat deprecated, no study of this nature has been conducted in the study region in South Africa yet. Equally important is the fact that the findings of the study are still very relevant to other research conducted in other parts of the world. M. Antinluoma *et al.* (2018) reached similar study conclusions. According to their study, most participating principals agreed that they use PLCs to influence both teacher-leadership and PLC members. Principals facilitated and provided the necessary PLC working conditions in their schools. In another study by M. Antinluoma *et al.* (2021) on the Practices of Professional Learning Communities, they used the same components, such as shared values and vision, shared supportive leadership, enabling structures and collaborative practices. These were the same structures used to evaluate principals' and teachers' practices of PLCs in their schools.

The findings of this study that teachers and principals highly rate their schools as PLCs, are also similar to those of J. Zhang *et al.* (2023). They concluded that shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application and supportive conditions-structures significantly and positively affected the teachers' collective learning especially when it came to students' discipline. Another area worth mentioning is the high rating of collective learning and application component. A. Schmidtke (2023) determined that all participants noted that when they learn together, their learning increases as they share with both experience and young colleagues. They explained that Shared professional development experiences provided them with opportunities to talk about their learning with one another to promote higher levels of understanding and increased perspective. Participants in a study by A. Schmidtke (2023) reported an increase in collaboration that was meaningful and reinforced their feeling of trust in each other.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study reemphasised that the core components for schools to establish PLCs are shared supportive leadership,

collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. It is the principal's role to monitor, guide, and facilitate this evolutionary process. The principal must support teams by continuously providing opportunities for growth by providing ongoing professional development related to the area of need. While the principals, SGB, HoDs, teachers, parents and other stakeholders continue to work on the problems that schools are facing in the case district in the Northwest Province of South Africa, it is time the Ministry of Education and the Department of Education re-examine its long-term strategy for school improvement in the district using the lenses of PLCs. In addition, to address problems like supportive conditions, other problems like learner drop-out, trust-building, accountability, continuous inquiry, genuine relationships, and collaboration among all the stakeholders should also be improved. Principals in this district should continue to develop the following capacities: personal mastery; mental models; shared vision; collaborative/shared learning; and systems thinking which is the cornerstone of change. Teachers' and principals' assessment of their schools is one major way by which can be re-examined the school's performance. Notably, principals rated their schools' performance as PLCs in all the core components higher than the teachers. Secondly, the findings revealed the level of the majority of these schools as PLCs and the disparity between female and male teachers in this district. This study has not only presented the findings of teachers' and principals' assessment of their schools but has also presented areas of schools' underperformance, as revealed especially by the supportive conditions (the structures component) and the comments of respondents. It is worthwhile to repeat this study in other provinces to see the similarities and differences and to come up with various ways the teachers can be supported to improve their performance.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that there is no conflict of interest in publishing this article.

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## **Школи як професійні навчальні спільноти: оцінка вчителів та директорів округу Північно-Західної провінції Південної Африки**

**Анотація.** Оскільки дослідники продовжують шукати стратегії, що приведуть до реальних системних змін у школах, актуально розглянути інструменти, якими користуються професійні навчальні спільноти для реформування навчальних закладів. Мета цього дослідження полягала в тому, щоб вивчити, як вчителі та директори в окрузі доктора Кеннета Каунда в Північно-Західній провінції Південної Африки сприймають свої школи як професійні навчальні спільноти. Застосовано кількісний підхід, і для цього дослідження відібрано 87 шкіл. Анкетовано 1260 вчителів та директорів цього району. Анкета базувалася на концептуальній основі професійних навчальних спільнот. Для аналізу даних використовувався програмний пакет Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Оцінка шкіл як професійних навчальних спільнот залишається потужним способом перегляду навчальних закладів для визначення результатів їхньої діяльності. Основний висновок полягав у тому, що респонденти, які повністю погоджувалися з усіма основними компонентами, коливалися від 21% (умови підтримки – структури) до 28 % (спільне лідерство та умови підтримки – стосунки). Респонденти, які погодилися з усіма основними компонентами, оцінили всі компоненти вище 50 % в діапазоні від 55 % (допоміжні умови – структури) до 65 % (додаткові твердження). Тоді як респонденти, які не погоджувалися, становили від 9 % до 18 %, респонденти, які повністю погоджувалися, становили лише від 1 % до 6 %. Директори оцінили свої школи як професійну навчальну спільноту вище, ніж вчителі. У цій статті встановлено й інші проблеми, з якими стикаються навчальні заклади цього району, що доповнюють ті, які вже висвітлювали попередні дослідники. Обґрунтовано позицію, що варто заохочувати школи використовувати рівень діяльності професійних навчальних спільнот як показник самооцінки. Ця стаття призначена насамперед для вчителів, директорів і всіх, хто займається реконструкцією шкіл, включно з Міністерством освіти

**Ключові слова:** колективна творчість; лідерство спільної підтримки; спільні цінності та бачення; вдосконалення школи