PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

EXPERIENCE IN THE COUNTRIES OF FINLAND, GEORGIA, MOLDOVA, NORWAY, SLOVENIA AND CROATIA

Kyiv
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EDUCATIONAL-METHODOLOGICAL MANUAL

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CONTENT

FOREWORD

Current educational reforms in Ukraine provide not only the new content of education (national educational standards, curriculum, educational materials etc.), but also the new approaches to teachers` professional development. Development of professional standards for preschool and schoolteachers, kindergarten and school principals was an important step in the reforming process. Teachers` professional standards are not only the description of working functions, general and professional competencies, which modern teachers should acquire; they are also the basis for teachers` reflection and planning their individual trajectory of professional development.

Another important step in a field of teachers` professional development was the opportunity for teachers to choose different in-service teacher training providers based on teachers` interests, needs, and according to the needs of the schools where they work in. The new structure - Centers of Professional Development – became the important resource in the process of teachers` professional development. The main task of these Centers is to support teachers` professional development, provide professional and psychological support, consulting, and coordination of the activities of professional learning communities. Therefore, Ukrainian legislation described a new concept – *professional learning communities* – providing its definition, as "professional teachers` communities are the communities (unions, groups) of educators, united by common interests within their professional activities".

It is obvious that the term itself does not provide the full understanding of the essence of the concept of professional communities; the description of the process of their development; understanding of the factors, which motivate teachers to unite in communities; differences between professional teachers` communities and the traditional methodological unions. At the same time, the concept of professional learning communities is very well known throughout

the world and recognized as one of the most effective strategy of professional development, which provides not only professional support, but also the emotional one; support in the process of implementation of innovations; relevance to the actual teachers` needs; development of the new culture of professional development based on the principles of partnership, trust at different levels of the educational system.

The purpose of the joint project, initiated by Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation in partnership with Ukrainian Institute of Education Development was familiarization with the best international practices of creating and development professional communities of educators. International Step by Step Association and the European Wergeland Centre supported project realization.

The project foreseen several webinars, which included presentations from partner countries – Croatia, Finland, Georgia, Moldova, Norway, and Slovenia – on their experience in development professional learning communities. Although development of professional learning communities is rather a new experience for Ukraine, it was noticeably that it was presented by EdCamp Ukraine NGO and British Council in Ukraine as well. Participants of the webinars were the representatives of the mentioned above countries. The main target group of those webinars in Ukraine was the Centers of Professional Development, which have been established as the part of educational reform in Ukraine. The main task of these Centers is to provide support of teachers in their professional development, including the support of development professional learning communities in Ukraine.

One of the project results was a development of manual "Professional learning communities: the best international practices", which included the national cases of development of the professional learning communities in the countries – participants of the project. Representatives of these countries described different models of professional learning communities in the context of the national educational reforms, shared the main advantages and challenges, and recommendations regarding the development and further sustainability of professional learning communities. Although the definition of professional learning communities can be different in each of the countries, f.e.: "learning community" or "community of learners" (Finland); "community of professional learning" or "teacher study groups" (Georgia), "learning networks" (Norway), "the groups of professional improvement", "professional assets" (Slovenia), all of them are characterized by the common features: volunteered participation, equality, mutual learning, trust, and reflection. The common for different models of professional learning communities are their advantages for teachers` professional

development, for achieving better students` learning results, increasing trust and partnership from parents. Participants also considered in their presentations the peculiarities of the work of professional learning communities in online format, which was caused by COVID-19.

We do believe that the next publication will include the best practices of development professional learning activities in Ukraine, and we hope that this manual will be one of the first steps to understanding this concept and its further development!

Nataliia Sofii,
Ukrainian Institute of Education Development

International Step by Step Association, www.issa.nl)

International community of organizations – national members from the countries in Europe and Central Asia. ISSA vision – society, where families, communities and professionals work together to support children in their individual potentials` realization and promoting values of social justice and equality. ISSA provides advocating and support of the system of early childhood education for all children, including children from the most vulnerable groups. ISSA is a leading network and international community, which promotes quality, accessible services for children, parents and teachers.

*Executive director: **Liana Ghent***

*Project Coordinator: **Eva Izsak***

The European Wergeland Centre (EWC), www.theewc.org

The European Wergeland Centre is the educational resource centre, aimed to support intercultural understanding, human rights protection and democratic citizenship. The main goal of EWC activities is to strengthen capacities of individuals, educational institutions and educational systems in providing sustainability of culture of democracy and human rights.

Executive Director: *Anna Perona-Fjelstad*

Project Coordinators: Iryna Sabor, Nataliya Yeremeyeva

Ukrainian Institute of Education Development (UIED), www.uied.org.ua)

The state institution "Ukrainian Institute of Education Development" was created according to resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine #593 as of 17.07.2019. According to this resolution, UEID is non-profit, independent organization within the governance of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. UIED mission – to establish the basis of the modern and competitive-based education both in its content and methodology; to develop the projects of fundamental changes in the education of Ukraine; to provide methodological support to schools in the process of realization of the government policy in a field of education, in particular in realization of the New Ukrainian School concept.

Director: Natalia Sofii

Project Coordinator: Oksana Fedorenko

Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation (USSF), www.ussf.kiev.ua)

Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, established by International Renaissance Foundation (Kyiv, Ukraine) in 1999. Mission of USSF to support implementation of educational reforms aimed at child-centered, inclusive education with active involvement of families and local communities. The mission of USSF is realized through training activities for educators, parents, representatives of civic organizations; initiating and implementing projects aimed at providing equal access to quality education for all children, including children with special educational needs; involvement families and local communities to educational and governance processes.
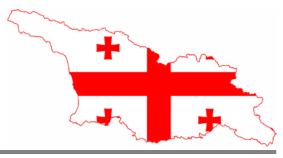
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PROFESSIONAL LERNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

GEORGIA

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE COUNTRY: NATIONAL CONTEXT.

Teacher Professional Development in Georgia is regulated and provided in accordance with the Teacher Pre-service, Professional Development and Career Advancement Scheme. It is a continuing professional development programme for teachers approved by the Government of Georgia and is based on the Professional Standards for Teachers and determines the mechanisms for beginning a teaching career, for evaluation, professional development and career advancement of the teachers. The current version of teacher professional standards specifies three categories of teachers: senior, lead and mentor teachers. Teachers have to pass subject exams and leveled exams in professional skills to advance to a higher category. As a subsequent stage, the external evaluation team conducts a 360-degree evaluation of teachers' performance: they analyze teacher portfolios, observe lessons, interview teachers and their school leaders and colleagues, and decide on teacher's promotion. Variety of activities are offered to teachers for their professional development based on their needs, however, trainings have been one of the most widespread formats for teacher professional development.

PROFESIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MODELS IN GEORGIA:

Historically, in Georgia there is little tradition for school-based collaborative professional development, which is broadly regarded as one of the primary forms of professional learning. On a national scale creation and operation of professional learning communities in Georgia started in the Autumn of 2016, within the project "Training Educators for Excellence (TEE)", funded by the Millenium Account - Georgia (MCA) and implemented by the National Center for Teacher Professional Development (TPDC) with technical support from IREX. The project was designed to improve the quality of instruction in STEM subjects through a two-year teacher professional development cycle that consisted of four in-person trainings, post-training application exercises, and PLC meetings, referred to locally as "teacher study groups."

Training Educators for Excellence has reached more than 18,000 teachers and 4,000 school principals and school-based teacher coaches, to improve instructional leadership and introduce more student-centered practices. Over two years, both groups participated in professional development to learn, apply and reflect on new practices through a series of training modules. The modules included readiness materials and activities, face-to-face training, follow-on assignments (practical application), and professional learning community meetings.

In the first two years, teacher professional learning communities created within the project, met more than 15,000 times to reflect and improve on use of student-centered methods for improved learning outcomes.

While creating this groups, local context, interest and needs of teachers were taken into consideration. In Georgia teachers highly value learning from others who teach the same subject, therefore, subject-oriented PLCs were created.

Participating in PLCs was encouraged, once it is one of the obligatory activities for teachers according to the Teacher Professional Standards and also, Teacher Professional Development and Career Advancement Scheme. During the project life, teachers could earn credits for participating in PLCs. This created a need for some central planning and tracking from the beginning. However, once the PLCs entered their second year, the level of external support decreased and teachers started doing more independent planning and goal setting for their PLCs.

The frequency of planned meetings, as well as their location and duration, has a huge impact on teacher enthusiasm for PLCs.

In the first year of the TEE project in Georgia, we aimed to organize PLCs that brought together teachers from different schools who teach the same subject. Although teachers experienced problems with transportation and identifying central meeting locations. It had a negative impact on their motivation to continue meeting. As we expanded PLCs in the second year, the groups were organized at the school level instead, giving up some of the connections between teachers of the same subject in order to increase convenience and accessibility.

Study group facilitators/coaches prepared teachers to lead reflections on using new teaching methods.

To make the study group meetings more organized and to further motivate teachers, school principals and school leaders were provided concurrent training on school management and leadership that emphasized the importance of teacher collaboration and learning and introduced them to PLCs. Principals play an important role in establishing collaboration and learning as a norm of the school culture. When they understand the goals of PLCs, they are often more willing to find time for teachers to meet and to celebrate teacher learning and growth in a way that is positive and motivating for teachers.

School leaders were introduced to student-centered learning, professional learning communities and instructional leadership, shortly before teachers participated in training on student-centered methods. As a result, while teachers applied new practices and participated in their first professional learning community meetings, school leaders demonstrated institutional buy-in to their reforms to teaching practice. A Study Group Guide for teachers and principals was designed by IREX to support these efforts.

One more model of PLCs that operate in Georgia, are so called TAGs or teacher activity groups. This new way of supporting teacher professional development was established with the help of British Council in Georgia. Teacher Activity Group sessions (TAGs) were facilitated to promote peer learning and exchange of ideas, experiences and expertise among teachers from the same communities.

A TAG involves a group of teachers meeting regularly, usually monthly, for between two and three hours to provide mutual support and share learning. All the teachers come from the same location: the town or village where the TAG takes place so they are familiar with the same context, the same challenges and the same sources of satisfaction of teaching learners in that location. This means that TAG can focus on the local needs and wants of teachers. Usually,

between ten and thirty teachers is an effective number for a TAG. Together, the teachers form what is called a 'community of practice' and as in any community, they share ideas and opinions and support each other's development.

Developments during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the capacity of teachers to take leadership and collaborate for mutual learning when navigating remote teaching. Teachers have been fully aware of the new skills and knowledge they needed amid the Pandemic and have done their best to seek help and collaborate within their school and beyond. Peer-led teaching and learning, sharing experiences, tools and resources appeared to be very effective and instilled and maintained a shared sense of purpose among participants. This promising experience of less formalized, need-based, self-driven, and collaborative professional learning led us to a new initiative, that was realized by the support of British Council. Online Teacher Community or OTC Georgia platform was offered to English teachers within the joint project. The platform is open for all English teachers in Georgia (totally up to 6 500). Within the project, first local OTC facilitators were selected and trained. Afterwards, registered teachers were distributed in the regional groups and they are provided with access to networking, forums, resources, webinars etc. This way we ensure not only teachers engage in new ideas and relevant discussions online on regular bases, share knowledge and experience, reflect on their practice and take part in research but more importantly:

- develop sense of ownership of different models of continuing professional development;
- raise awareness of the latest trends and in ELT methodology;
- develop skills for classroom practice reflection;
- increase motivation in trying and applying new concepts, approaches and techniques in their classroom;
- increase ability to conduct meaningful, reliable and valid action research;
- develop student-focused approaches in lesson plan development that's in line with curriculum reform requirements.

Teachers are engaged in Online Communities of Practice in support of their professional development and accept the idea of self-development and take ownership of their own CPD. Through OTC engagement, teachers meet the obligation set within school based professional development standards that supports their career progression and obtaining higher level teacher status

within the National Teacher Professional Development and Career Advancement Scheme. What is more, a pool of teacher education Facilitators is developed across the country.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED:

To make PLC experience successful, teachers as well as school leaders have been provided with trainings and support. The development of complementary learning outcomes and cross-referencing content for teachers and school leaders enables both groups to progress through a learning journey together, preparing each for their respective roles in facilitating change.

The success of TAGs, as well as OTC, is dependent on engaging effectively with participant groups of teachers, and school leaders in order that the process, the goals and benefits are understood, and on individuals receiving ongoing support and input from the TAG and OTC facilitators.

All TAG and OTC facilitators had received trainings preparing them to lead TAGs or OTC, introducing online platforms, refreshing and updating knowledge. The trainings were delivered on a flexible and/or convenient schedule by trainers with strong skills.

There have been some challenges identified while delivering TAG and OTC activities. The most significant challenge was teacher participation rates, indicated by most facilitators. As for the reasons, they had different explanations for the low levels of turnout, which included: a lack of information; an unwillingness among teachers to spend more time on extra activities; and the effects of the pandemic. This may suggest the possibility of a complex convergence of factors behind lower turnout.

Other reported challenges were technical and in case of minority languages regions, linguistic as well.

In order to improve PLC operation and to motivate teachers become active members of learning communities, some changes need to be implemented on the policy level. Good organization and sufficient communication may solve some of the problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The evaluation of various models finds the following guiding principals for successful learning communities to support more interactive pedagogical thinking and practice:

- Engaging in reflective, meaningful dialogue and exchange among members of communities- reflective practice and critical inquiry, supporting ongoing deep change;

- Teachers are construed as professionals, capable of critiquing and developing their practice;

- Online platform can provide a community of practice for teachers across the country and on international level without any need for travel. Teachers should be registered for this and access to the necessary technology should be facilitated for them. There might be a need for a mobile version of the platform.

- Community of practice should also be facilitated through collaboration between teachers in the same school for various purposes.

- Engaging school principals in supporting the formation and facilitation of teacher professional learning communities in their schools;

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:

Links to the main relevant resources: publications, organizations, video

https://www.britishcouncil.ge/en/programmes/education/future-english/online-teacher-community

https://www.irex.org/insight/how-professional-learning-communities-can-strengthen-teachers-professional-development

PROFESSIONAL LERNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

MOLDOVA

Cornelia Cincilei,
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THE COUNTRY EDUCATION REFORM AND THE ROLE OF STEP BY STEP MOLDOVA AS PROMOTER OF CHILD-CENTERED EDUCATION (CCE) IN THIS CONTEXT

In 2008 Moldova started an important reform in early education. By that time, SBSM which first introduced child-centered practices in 1994, acquired with very important international capacity building support the capacity to foster an in-country know-how transfer and contribute to a systemic change in early education by:

- modelling CCE and democratic learning communities at classrooms level
- gaining the support of parents as partners in the education process,
- advocating for change, showcasing (it can work!)
- building alliances internationally and nationally (e.g. with UNICEF Moldova)
- relying on the ISSA (International Step by Step Association) learning community as continuous source of professional development.
- and later, as ISSA member, in introduce the concept Child-Centered Education (CCE) as basis for a inclusion in the broadest sense.

In partnership with UNICEF, SBSM contributed to the development of new policy documents based on CCE (Early Learning and Development Standards for Children 0-7; National Teacher Professional Standards (inspired by ISSA Pedagogical Standards); School Readiness Monitoring Tool, etc.). Besides, building on its experience as ISSA member, SBSM introduced mentoring as a form of teachers' continuous professional development, and with UNICEF support, CCE and mentoring were included in the national Education Code 2014.

Thus, important steps were made at the level of policy documents. Still, the main issues are related to how to translate the discourse of progressive policy documents into the classroom practice. Particularly how to enable teachers to function in the new pedagogic paradigm.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION REFORM PROMOTION

For the success of a major education reform it is crucially important to reach a shared understanding by all the stakeholders. Switching from teacher-centered/directed to child-centered education is not a minor adjustment of practices. It is rather a major shift in values and beliefs that practicians build their classroom practice on. And, very importantly, in how the education system supports this transition by refocusing pre- and in-teacher training practices in tune with the new CCE approach, and in how the quality of teaching-learning is being evaluated .

In Moldova, although the officially stated policy documents are based on CCE and the RELEVANCE of education is viewed as a dimension of quality education, the big remaining problem is what is meant by quality in the announced new paradigm by different stakeholders,. When quality education means relevant, i.e. meaningful education, the arising question is *Meaningful for whom?*, since the way it is answered would reflect taking one or another perspective in the teacher – vs. child/learner-centered dichotomy.

Meaningful education implies a dramatic power shift. This power shift should be based on TRUST and should happen at different levels of the education system, in relations between different relevant actors in order to make education really meaningful.

A. Power shifts needed at the classroom level

Changed beliefs as preconditions for changed teachers' roles:

- about the image of the child: do teachers trust in children's ability to learn/be competent as learners, as independent and normally intrinsically motivated meaning-makers?

- about the value of child-initiated play: do teachers trust it to be meaningful for child's learning or just as fun (they learn only when taught directly)?

- do teachers trust in own ability to manage large classrooms while responding to diverse children's interests and individual needs – how to avoid chaos, how to be sure all children are getting attention, all are learning, etc.?

- are they able to trust parents as partners, contributors to ameaningful learning in the classroom and outside it?

b. Power shifts needed at the system level

The transition towards child-centered education requires much improved skills, less relevant in an overcentralized education system. The teachers in transition need:

- competent observation skills

- reflective thinking.

How does the system help teachers in this transition?

c. A power shift in the system's relation with its teachers

To be able to try out new approaches, trust children as learners and parents as partners, teachers need:

- more trust and less formal control from the authorities

- competent support to develop the above skills, which are not still properly addressed through the pre- and in-teacher training system.

3. A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO QUALITY PROMOTION

In a bottom-up approach to quality promotion in education in Moldova, SBSM supports the development of learning communities of reflective practitioners, using the tools from ISSA Quality Resource Pack for a shared understanding of CCE and Inclusive Education

SBSM shares the belief that competent teachers are the key to competent systems.

We praise the efforts of our Ukrainian partners to focus on such as an important approach in teachers' professional development as PLC and to create a forum for such a broad discussion among the relevant stakeholders. Wishing you all success and much resilience under the circumstances

PROFESSIONAL LERNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

NORWAY

At national level, the responsibility regarding quality management is to set the objectives, develop, and administer tools that school owners and schools can use in the work of developing quality. National and local plans and goals are the basis for systematic process to enhance quality development in the Norwegian school system. The overarching goal is better well-being and learning outcome for children, students and apprentices.

White papers (Meld.St.) are drawn up when the Government wishes to present matters to the Storting that do not require a decision. White papers tend to be in the form of a report to the Storting on the work carried out in a particular field and future policy.

In 2004 (White paper No 30(2003-2004) the government presented a non-traditional way of improving development in Norwegian schools. The paper contended that development and change should be initiated at the local level by teachers and heads of schools. Through reflection on daily teaching and learning, practice changes should take place. The White Paper placed a strong emphasis on the fact that education must be developed through a dialogue with, and between, those who have their daily work in and for schools. . Thus, development in schools should start "from within" and "from the bottom", that is to say in the schools themselves. One expected outcome was to build local capacity for local development and construct schools to be learning organizations

Teacher education programmes in Norway have seen many changes since the 2003 Quality Reform. The changes have been driven partly by new research, partly by political ambitions and partly by development initiatives instigated by universities and university colleges.

It is the government's ambition to permanently strengthen the Norwegian teaching professions. The investments being made now are important in order to prepare for a future in which knowledge and competencies will become increasingly important. The aim is for kindergartens and schools to draw on the teaching professions' own professional strengths to enhance quality.

The impact of teacher education on the teaching professions has been highlighted in several policy documents, in particular in the strategy Promotion of the Status and Quality of Teachers for 2025. The government has addressed the major challenges in this area through improvement of the institutional structure, elevation of primary and lower secondary teacher education to the master level, large investments in a robust national system for continuing education, introduction of more rigorous entry requirements for teacher education programes for both the primary and the secondary level, as well as the requirement, effective from 2019, that candidates for the 1-year programe in educational theory and practice (PPU) must hold a master's degree.

In line with White Paper No. 16 (2016– 2017) Quality Culture in Higher Education, the strategy expresses an ambition for less micromanagement by central government, focusing instead on setting out clear expectations and establishing relationships of trust. One goal for the period up until 2025 is that the combined quality processes taking place in relation to the teacher education programmes – which include good central co-ordination and improved cooperation with the field of practice – should lead to a reduction in the use of national curriculum regulations to a minimum level, something that the expert panel on the role of the teacher and others have recommended.

Primary and lower secondary teacher education programmes at master level will be introduced in the autumn of 2017. Academic ambitions are high. The candidates will be better prepared to find and use research-based knowledge. The master's thesis will be professionally oriented, based on experience and relevant for work in schools.

White Paper No. 16 (2016-2017) Quality Culture in Higher Education paints a picture of the broader challenges in higher education that is very much consistent with what faces teacher education providers: It is necessary to have much higher ambitions for the students, to boost completion rates, to improve consistency and coherence in the programmes, and to place greater emphasis on making necessary pedagogical adjustments. The main recommendations of the white paper will also have a direct impact on teacher education programmes. High-quality teaching will be rewarded through the development of new academic merit systems.

Teacher education providers will play an important role in developing content for quality enhancement initiatives in close and long-term cooperation with school owners and professional learning communities in schools and in dialogue with the county governor. The provision should be school-based wherever possible.

A recurring question for most teacher education programmes has been their relevance for professional practice. Campus-based education and practice training in the workplace have unfortunately been treated as two unconnected domains. Academic staff at the teacher education institutions have not been sufficiently focused on the actual challenges that exist in kindergartens and schools

As part of a reorganisation of teacher education in Norway, parliament decided in 2009 to introduce a "system with obligatory partnership agreements between teacher education institutions and kindergarten/school owners which clarify roles, responsibilities and mutual obligations with regard to the practice training". However, partnerships have to date been developed primarily at the initiative of the institutions themselves. The universities of Oslo and Tromsø have set up a number of university schools, partly in order to boost the quality of the practice training.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In 2017 the Norwegian government decentralized professional development to the local authorities. The aim was that professional development should be based on local needs in each school and each community. And also to strengthen the professional development in schools through partnership between schools and the Universities. The ambition to decentralize professional development might be understood as an ambition to move power to the the local level and to regulate and govern by national goals and laws on the other hand. This is handed by introducing and support networks between schools and partnerships e.g with universities. This must be understood as a wish to make professional development based om local adaptions and national standards. The network idea is further based on the possibility for professional development through expanded spaces for teachers to influence their practice

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES – LEARNING NETWORKS AS AN EXAMPLE

The Norwegian schools system has the last thirty years been strongly influenced by the New Public Management logic. This means that the national government set the curriculum and national evaluations, while local authorities is given the responsibility to realize the policy. Another major influence since early 2000 is international investigations (e.g PISA and TIMMS), and for Norway`s sake showing lower results in students outcomes than expected. This has resulted in a flow of national reforms regarded to assessment, classroom instruction, science and literacy.

This is defined as national strategies on supplementary teacher training and has influenced more or less all schools in Norway since 2010. The strategy has recommended "learning network" between schools as an important strategy. The networks are described as "arenas for professional development" characterized by transmission of experience from local practices and reflections based on research findings and experience from classroom practice . There is a rather wide local freedom how to organize the learning networks. In Norway there are ongoing attempts to introduce and run learning networks among teachers and schools leaders as strategies to implement the new school reforms, also in new programmes for continuing education of teachers.

During the last ten years learning network has been used as a promising strategy to implement reforms in Norwegian schools. The network strategy is recognized as a key driver to encourage professional collaboration, innovation , the spread of good practice and the mutual transparency in communities of schools in a schools district. Research shows that participation in professional learning communities has positive impact on teachers professional development. An important argument is that professional networks can strengthen the long-termed and continuing school development, and is most successful when it is supported by external experts.

The network strategy when implementing reforms is based on three fundamental reasons. First it is a partnership between participants working with practices that are similar but non-similar since they are developed in different sites by different teachers. Second, the network strategy builds on local competence and are less dependent from experts above. And third; this implies a trust on professional competence to handle reforms together.

Learning through participation in networks and dialogue conferences is largely based on on the participants`experiences and formulations thereof

when ,meeting other practitioners and also sometimes with researchers from Universities. This is in line with the idea of bringing Techers Education in stronger partnership with professionals from schools.

Important outcomes from the learning networks are stronger emphasis on mediating the theory-practice learning, the focus on professional learning among teachers and heads on the school, long-time based and continued professional learning   and collective learning.

What we also see is that we have to pay more attention to the learning process between what is being worked on the network seminars and how this is transformed and translated into classroom practice om each school.

The learning network also plays an important role by showing an bottom up alternative in times of flow of educational change by finding and using new spaces to fight against top-down processes.

PROFESSIONAL LERNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

SLOVENIA

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This case study will introduce professional learning communities (PLCs) as a school-based professional development strategy implemented in Slovenian kindergartens and primary schools, members of the Step by Step Network for changing Quality (Network). The Network, which includes approximately 10% of Slovenian kindergartens and primary schools is coordinated by the Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education, Slovenia[1].

Despite the fact that PLCs make an important contribution to the professional development of ECEC and primary school staff, they are not mentioned in the Slovenian legislation governing the professional development of the staff in the education sector. Explicitly mentioned are study groups and professional assets, the latter are obligatory. Those can be implemented in various ways; some kindergartens and schools implement them in the form of PLCs.

From the Network's beginnings in 2000, its mission has been focused on ensuring the quality of the educational process by developing, implementing and evaluating systems, processes, tools, organizational solutions and content support that facilitate this process for practitioners (Vonta, 2019). However, the burden of responsibility for the quality of the educational process cannot be transferred solely to teachers. Competent system support must be provided to teachers, as also confirmed by recent research (Urban et al, 2012; Sharmahd et al. 2017; Ionescu et al. 2018), in which our Network has been addressed as an example of good practice.

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[1] https://www.korakzakorakom.si/english (10.6.2022)

REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING PLCS

Five main reasons guided us to start supporting and encouraging teachers to implement PLCs within their institutions.

1. "One size fits all approach" was often used in the trainings attended by teachers. By this we mean that the training facilitators did not encourage participants to reflect on their own practice. Moreover, no reflection was expected from the participants on how to transfer what was heard into their own context. Specific characteristics of each kindergarten, school, classroom, the needs of individual children, and the teachers' teaching experience were not taken into consideration.

2. We noticed a low level of awareness among teachers about planning their own professional development path. Teachers attended professional trainings «by inspiration» or they chose trainings that were available, without any in-depth reflection on their own practice. After finishing the training, teachers usually did not put effort of implementing the newly gained knowledge into practice.

3. Teachers lacked support in implementing the newly acquired knowledge into classroom activities. They were expected to develop professionally, but received no support with introducing changes into their practice. Therefore, many gave up encountering the first barriers in introducing novelties into their practice.

4. The quality of the pedagogical process was not the subject of teachers' meetings. Study meetings were generally dedicated to sharing good practices and concrete ideas to use in the practice and professional assets were mostly used to discuss organizational matters. There was lack of opportunities to reflect the classroom practice.

5. Following the absence of teachers' discussions of the pedagogical process at the level of the institution, there was no common vision of what the quality of the pedagogical process is and how the quality of the pedagogical process is reflected in their institution and in each classroom. (Brajkovič, 2019).

ABOUT THE PLCS

The above-mentioned reasons lead us to the decision that the concept of PLCs needs to be introduced to kindergartens and primary schools. This happened in 2012 when we began encouraging teachers and school directors to implement them.

PLC is defined as "a social grouping of new and experienced educators, who come together over time for the purpose of gaining new information, reconsidering previous knowledge and beliefs, and building on their own and others' ideas and experiences in order to work on a specific agenda, intended to improve practice and enhance student learning" (Cochran- Smith and Lyle, 2011). The basic goal of the PLC is professional development of teachers toward becoming competent, reflective practitioners and building supportive environment that enables professional development by building shared understanding of pedagogical concepts, quality of practice etc. "The work of the PLC, accordingly, has an objective to support teachers, both emotionally and professionally, throughout the course of their professional development. It offers them the opportunity for:

- critical reflection on their own teaching;

- giving feedback to other members of the community on the quality of their teaching and learning;

- sharing concrete ideas with other teachers on how to improve the learning experience of children;

- motivating other teachers to enhance the quality of their work and helping them enjoy their work" (Brajković, 2019, p. 15).

In order for this development to proceed smoothly, teachers should be able to analyze and research issues and materials of interest; have an opportunity to link the new with the familiar; introduce new activities in their work in order to understand them and integrate better; receive mentorship through guidance and explanation; observe how their colleagues hold a class competently; use different resources as the basis for actions they will carry out in their work. (Caine and Caine in Režek, Jager, Mervic, 2020).

PLC MEMBERS

The key person in a PLC is the leader. His/her role is to facilitate the teachers' co-construction of knowledge using the ISSA Quality Resource Pack[2] instead of being seen as the expert on the child-centered practice in the kindergarten or primary school.

Members of the PLC are preschool teachers, preschool teacher assistants and primary school teachers. Their role is to actively participate at monthly meetings by reflecting their practice with support of ISSA quality principles and also change their practice based on reflections.

KEY CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL OPERATION OF PLC

Within the Network, we provide two key conditions that contribute to the successful operation of the PLC, and those are:

1. support to PLC leaders and

2. raising awareness of kindergarten and primary school directors about the importance and the role of PLC within the organization and in the professional development of teachers.

In order for the PLC leader to successfully perform his/her role, we offer him/her extensive support. When a professional is new in the role of a leader, he/she is invited to participate in the initial training on child centered methodology and so-called training „What every PLC leader needs to know", where he/she is introduced to the basics of a PLC: how to manage/facilitate work in a PLC, what is the role of the PLC leader, what is reflection and how to enable reflection among the PLC members. During the school year, the PLC leaders participate several development events, such as: a 2-day professional development event, which is focused on improving skills for leading, on learning new methods about working with a group of professionals or using resources to develop shared understanding etc.; a 1-day reflection meeting, which is held in the middle of the school year and is dedicated to follow up the implementation of PLCs in the (pre)schools. At the end of the school year, we meet with all the PLC leaders again in order to have a common overview of the year. If any of the PLC leaders expresses the need for further individual support, we attend

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[2] https://www.issa.nl/quality_pack (10. 6. 2022)

their PLC meeting, observe the process and after the meeting reflect the implementation together with the PLC leader and develop the plan for improvement.

Since the kindergarten's/primary school's director has crucial role in encouraging, motivating and leading the staff in the direction of continuous professional development, it is important that some of the Network's activities are designed especially for them. Every year, we organize a 2-day meeting to empower the management in supporting the PLCs in their environment. The content of the meeting is focused on shared leadership, on building the learning culture in the organization, reflection etc. At the end of the school year, we also gather school directors in order to have an overview of the year.

PLCS IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, PLC meetings were held online, which resulted in several challenges. The greatest challenge in the beginning was hesitation of the PLC leaders regarding the online implementation. It derived from their insecurity using the online tools for professional group meetings and lack of their skills for using online platforms. As a consequence, the number of PLC meetings decreased (only 1 per year). However, with time and support offered within the Network, most of the PLC leaders mastered the online implementation and held virtual meetings without any major difficulties. They only reported certain challenges with the active participation of members.

We addressed the identified challenges with more intensive support. During the 2-day meeting, we implemented training on how to use the online platform ZOOM, including other tools that can help the PLC leaders to achieve more interactive online implementations (Mentimeter, Jamboard etc.). They also received materials to share with members of their PLCs. For example, they received concrete ideas for implementing icebreakers in the online environment, they learnt how to create online evaluation sheets, etc.

As part of a reflective meeting with the PLC leaders, we gave them the opportunity to share their experiences on how the work in kindergartens and schools is being carried out despite the changed situation, what is working and where they would need additional support. In this context, it was really inspiring to hear those professionals, who were the most courageous to start with online implementations in that period, because they also encouraged others who were still hesitating. At the end of the school year, we also offered them written feedback on their online performances (what was done well, what could be different, etc.).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF PLCS

In conclusion, we want to highlight the key recommendations that contribute to the sustainability of the developed PLC on the level of a kindergarten/primary school.

1. Involvement of management: The involvement of management in the PLC is crucial for their development and even more for their continuous operation. The management is crucial in establishing a vision of continuous professional development of the staff at the level of organization and ensuring structural conditions for their PLCs to operate. PLCs are maintained in environments where institutional learning culture is nurtured through distributed leadership.

2. Participatory approach: It is important that each PLC member understands that everyone involved shares responsibility for the process. The PLC is a space for shared learning of all – for the leader and its members. The PLC leader facilitates the learning process, while the members contribute significantly with their ideas, reflection, activities, etc.

3. Reflexivity versus "recipes": Only the reflection of the practice enables its continuous improvement, therefore it is important to build on the competencies for the reflection of the members. Often, the members expect «merely» concrete ideas or "recipes" that could be transferred into practice and thus enrich it, yet without the reflection of their own practice, this does not contribute to a higher quality of the process.

4. PLC leader as a key person: as the PLC leader has the key role in facilitating the learning process, it is extremely important that continuous support to him/her is provided from the kindergarten/primary school director as well as from relevant external professionals.

5. External support: External assistance to the PLC leaders is of paramount importance in leading the process and overcoming challenges, especially in the PLC establishing phase.

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PROFESSIONAL LERNING COMMUNITIES:
THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

FINLAND

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
IN THE COUNTRY: NATIONAL CONTEXT

In Finland, a teacher's qualification is based on a university degree. This applies to both classroom teachers and subject teachers. According to the new Daycare Act, kindergarten teachers must also have a university degree in the future. The teacher's formal qualification is a prerequisite for filling the teacher's position.

The Finnish school legislation does not recognize the concept of a learning community, which means that in-service training for teachers is not recorded in the Basic Education Act and the Upper Secondary School Act. The teacher's formal qualification also does not need to be renewed or demonstrated to be up-to-date after the degree completed at the university.

In Finnish education, the curriculum plays a central role in implementing both teaching and the school's operating culture. The curriculum defines the concept of a learning community, which broadly describes the school's mission as a promoter of versatile learning.

In the teachers' employment contract, the employer's obligation to organize three days of in-service training for teachers during the year is specified. Continuing education takes place outside working hours. The methods of organizing the training vary, but to a large extent the employer or the schools implement it as internal training., The training can be for developing the pedagogical skills of the teachers or for the development and planning of the general operation of the school.

WHY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?
THE GOALS OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT. WHAT EXISTED BEFORE

Perhaps the most significant teacher learning communities are the various voluntary teacher organizations that organize versatile training and networking for teachers. In this activity as well, the relationship with curriculum changes is an essential part of educational activities. Along with content learning, teachers can exchange good pedagogical practices and have collegial discussions to develop their own work. At the same time, the network supports teachers' professional growth and creates opportunities for joint projects.

The importance of learning communities is manifold. Perhaps the most important thing in the Finnish context is to understand the role of all the people working in the school as part of the learning community. In a learning community, both teachers and students cooperate in a goal-oriented manner. The ethos of the school emerges from shared learning experiences, where learning is a lifelong process that belongs to the rights of every person working in the school.

The change in learning environments has also created new types of learning communities, which can be called global environments. This strengthens the learners' own identity and understanding of the international goals of education. The operation of learning communities is based on cooperation and trust, which plays a central role when working with international networks. In Finland, extensive project activities have also been deliberately created in schools, the funding of which is currently based on the implementation of network-like projects. Building networks and ensuring their operation requires identifying the philosophy of a common learning community.

THE MAIN MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
AND THE MAIN ROLES OF THEIR MEMBERS

As I have already stated before, the implementation of learning communities in Finland can be divided into two different categories. On the one hand, it is about the learning communities of the teaching staff, and on the other hand, the cooperation between teachers and students implemented at the school level.

For teachers, the most significant implementers are teachers' organizations, through which new kinds of learning opportunities are created. The role of the Board of Education is also significant in Finland, as it consciously strives to build new types of learning communities to promote education. In the opera-

tional strategy of the Board of Education, all significant national development projects invite a wide group of participants from different areas of education. In this way, e.g. the participation of teachers and principals and the creation of new types of networks between different actors.

Continuing education at universities also plays a significant role, although it is more focused on developing individual skills. It can also be clearly seen that with the increase of electronic tools and the growth of international activities, many learning communities are no longer institutional but rather thematic groups emerging from the common interest of individuals.

A key aspect of learning communities is their equality. They are not based on power relations or job roles, but rather are shared learning experiences where every member of the learning community has an equal role. We also want to emphasize this point of view when we talk about the school as a learning community.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ONLINE: HOW IT WORKS

In the past two years, the pandemic has changed the world of education in many different ways. Perhaps the most central and biggest change is the explosive growth of online teaching and learning. At the same time, when we are used to using information technology even more strongly. as a learning tool, we have also formed new types of learning communities that function even more strongly in a global context.

Online learning enables the creation of new and flexible learning communities. From the user's point of view, it is important that he can join important and significant learning communities regardless of time and place. This is important when thinking about the development of modern working life. In many ways, this new time also challenges the school as a traditional learning community, because still going to school. involves a bounded use of time and a perception of a permanent learning environment. Through networks, this idea disappears and already a large number of learning communities can be seen, which are based on, for example, students' own networks.

ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES` FUNCTIONING

The advantages of learning communities are their flexibility, adaptability and focus on subjects of interest to the participants. On a personal level, the learner can belong to several learning communities without the so-called official continuing education status. However, it should be noted that in order to function well, learning communities also require some kind of structure, i.e. regular maintenance and a schedule. What is significant, however, is that participation is mainly voluntary and can be regulated according to one's own interest and other life situations.

One of the most important advantages of the learning community is the growth of the participant's own personal commitment. Being the subject of one's own learning means that the participant also understands the importance of their own active role as the implementer of the learning community. In this sense, the concept of a learning community challenges the so-called traditional frontal teaching, where the teaching has a designated implementer and the learning is intended only for the receiving group.

Perhaps the most significant challenge of learning communities is their reliability. In particular, the world of information networks has brought to the fore many kinds of reference groups whose content, discussions and gatherings are dubious or contain completely wrong information. Recognizing the quality of a learning community is not always easy and it may be challenging even for well-educated individuals. It is also important to note that a learning community requires some kind of structure to be successful, because it is easy to disengage from unstructured activities, and it does not motivate enough for long-term participation.

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COUNTRIES, WHICH START TO DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

At the level of the entire education system, it is good to think about what a learning community or a community of learners really means? In my opinion, the issue as a whole is a change in teaching and pedagogical thinking, which does not only concern the so-called trained personnel but all persons working in the school and education. It should be considered whether the principles of the learning community are implemented in daily work at school or whether the

concept of the learning community is only reserved for supporting professional growth. If only the last of the previous things comes true, then the concept of a learning community does not permeate the entire school world.

The concept of a learning community should be defined in a national education document. However, I would not consider it primarily part of education legislation, but rather part of the curriculum or local guidelines. The learning community is a flexible structure and legislation easily freezes it into a similar structure and makes it mandatory. For a living organism, this can be harmful and reduce the motivation of the participants, because it is something mandatory.

However, it should be noted that a learning community requires organization and structure. Especially if you want the activity to be long-lasting and impressive. A good Finnish example of this is the work of the Finnish National Board of Education, where, even with strictly defined teaching development tasks, it has been possible to create new types of learning communities that enrich the development of teaching and learning in the entire nation.

PROFESSIONAL LERNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES

CROATIA

The institution responsible for the professional development of educators and teachers in Croatia is the Agency for Education (AZOO), whose role is to ensure the continuous professional development of professionals. According to the Agency for Education (2014-2020), quality professional training is a content-organized, accessible, continuous and diverse series of activities, clearly defined goals that enable different target groups, in accordance with their needs and the needs of the educational system, professional development and learning. It is focused on the development of competencies, improving the quality of teaching and improving educational learning outcomes. On the website of the Agency for Education (https://www.azoo.hr/profesionalni-razvoj/najave-i-izvjesca/) there is a Catalog of professional gatherings organized in accordance with the needs of practitioners. Non-formal professional development recognizes the importance of lifelong learning as a key element. With the different formal and informal modalities of learning in work are particularly valuable highlight those forms of professional development that are happening or should happen within the professional community.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Professional learning communities can consist of **groups of educators who work at the same preschool/school, groups of preschools/schools or even *online* communities.**

They are characterized by a number of core beliefs:

(1) that professional development is critical to children's learning;

(2) that professional development is most effective when it is collaborative;

(3) the collaborative work should involve inquiry and problem-solving about daily teaching practice in our particular teaching context (Servage, 2008).

A professional learning community is more than a group of professionals that meet regularly, for example, for staff meetings or training. It is a group of educators who come together to cooperate and communicate with each other, who trust each other, and who have a sense of interdependence through combining their talents and capacities. They develop a shared vision and seek answers to the following questions: "What do we want to create?" "What kind of a preschool/school do we wish to become?" "What kind of a preschool/school do we want for our children?" "Why do we exist?" "How are we going to know when we have achieved our vision?" (Tankersley, Seiffer et al., 2019). In other words, three elements that are necessary for the development of learning communities and which are incorporated into the structure of community work are **collaboration, vision and reflection** (Brajković, 2014).

Although reflection is a key competence for educators, teachers are usually expected to reflect on their practice on their own, filling out documents. Reflection is rarely developed with the help of collaborative and personalised, joyful processes.

However, when reflection is done with meaningful, motivating and collaborative methods, it facilitates true learning and a shift in the quality of education and care. Such reflective methods promote systematic and positive support for professional learning within every (pre)school and increases educators' sense of belonging and appreciation.

ELEMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY MEETING STRUCTURE:

1. Warm-up - creating a sense of community and strengthening collaboration

2. Reflection on the activities carried out – the teacher briefly talks about the activities carried out, observations, dilemmas, ideas for improvement (10min), other teachers ask questions and seek clarification, offer their ideas for improving solutions to problems (15min), the teacher says for what suggestions thinks it will help her (5min), everyone has the opportunity to tell her opinion and impressions (5min)

3. Developing a common understanding of quality - discussing one quality indicator driven by an article, text, video, etc.

4. Planning next steps - each teacher writes his or her own individual quality improvement plan

5. Conclusion of the meeting - closing remarks, conclusions, evaluation of the meeting

Reflection is the process of revising a professional experience to describe, analyse and evaluate it (Reid, 1993). It answers the questions «Where are we now?» and «How good are we in terms of what we want to be?» Which of the following had an effect on the students and which did not? On what basis can I say this? Which of what we tried had the most effect? What student behaviours indicated that we were on the right track? (Caine and Caine, 2010).

It is incorporated in the structure of learning community meetings on three levels, as described by Cowan (1998):

1. Reflection in action: During meetings, the educators (based on previous experience and an understanding of certain elements of high-quality teaching) plan activities. During the execution of these activities, they observe children's reactions. This is called reflection in action, reflection during action, or reflection on the first level. Recording a journal while they are making observations may help the educator while he or she is reflecting in action.

2. Reflection on action: Immediately after teaching, educators reflect on whether they have carried out activities as planned, whether there were any discrepancies and, finally, what they would do differently next time and why. Once again it is useful to record and analyse reflections in a journal.

3. Reflection on reflection: At the learning community meeting, educators present their thoughts to colleagues after the plan has been carried out. At each community learning meeting, all those in attendance briefly present how they carried out activities in their classrooms, how children reacted, what they would do differently, etc.

Being part of a professional learning community promotes our professional development, enhances the overall quality of practice and puts us in a decision-making role in our profession. We assume responsibility for our own growth and the consequences of what we do. We are 'agents of change' rather than simply followers of others (Tankersley, Seiffer et al., 2019).

To be more specific, research on **the benefits of being a teacher included in professional learning communities, according to Hord (1997), are:**

- greater satisfaction, enthusiasm and less absenteeism

- significantly increasing the number of adaptations to students 'needs during teaching

- commitment to making significant and lasting changes

- more likely to make systematic changes to work
- reduced teacher isolation
- increased commitment to work to accomplish the mission of the school
- increased sense of shared responsibility for the achievements of all children
- teaching in accordance with the definitions of quality practice and quality teaching, which acquires new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and students
- a better understanding of the content being taught and the role teachers play in helping students achieve their learning goals
- teachers are more likely to be better informed and to renew their professional knowledge and to inspire their students to learn

While students benefit from the work of learning communities as well, in following ways:
- reduced number of absences
- greater accomplishments
- minor differences in achievement among children of different backgrounds greater help from teachers and colleagues.

BUILDING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF QUALITY WITHIN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Educators will work on developing a better common understanding of one educational concept or quality indicator. Usually, a new concept is selected at each meeting. Sometimes, if it is a more complex concept, the PLC may decide to continue working on it over the course of several meetings.

Regardless of which materials members of PLC use, the process of developing a common understanding of quality indicators should consist of several steps (Wald and Castleberry,2000).

1. Definition – Educators exchange opinions on how they understand individual quality indicators, because there is a possibility of different or ambiguous definitions of the same term.

2. Studying – In this phase, educators seek new understanding of terms and identify to what extent and in what ways is the specific quality indicator visible in their practice.

3. Experimenting – In this phase, educators should understand that learning suited for adults is an active process which applies new ideas and theories. Educators engage in individual reflection on the following possible questions: 'What have I learned? What will I apply?'. As a group, the PLC members reflect on such questions as: 'What have we as a group learned?' 'What would be good areas to investigate more?'.

Materials and Activities Facilitators will use to provoke discussions around quality are: joint reading of articles, chapters from professional literature, or research on learning/teaching and short workshops on different strategies which can be implemented in the classroom.

In conclusion, it is important to raise awareness on the importance of building resilient practitioners' communities from a professional and personal points of view so they can face systemic challenges on a lower level of stress, leading to more successful cooperation among colleagues and with families.

PLC ONLINE

Professional learning communities that have been active for a long time and in COVID conditions have been maintained, in the online model.

The experience of Croatian Learning Communities in online conditions is diverse: although it is very important that practitioners consult with each other and exchange experiences, some teams, due to poorer digital literacy of their employees, estimated that online meetings of Learning Communities are of lower quality. However, the improvement of digital literacy is one of the competencies for lifelong learning, so progress has been made in this regard.

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES