

# **Developing Leadership by Participating in Principal Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs) and the Added Value of Transnational Collaboration**

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**Abstract**

*This article presents a case study aiming to encourage and support principals from six countries to work in Principal Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs) to enhance their leadership competencies and foster strong leadership for school development and teacher learning. We argue that the need for principals to participate in a PLC is a fundamental but also forgotten perspective in school leadership. Our most important findings indicate that the principals participating in a PPLC gained (1) enhanced leadership skills, (2) awareness of and security in their own leadership roles, (3) new knowledge about organisation and implementation of PLCs and (4) appreciation of the importance of PLCs. An added value was the benefit of meeting peers from different countries, which contributed to their reflections about their own school systems and practices. We argue that facilitation and support is important to establishing effective PPLCs and that external support may be considered to create a structure for and to strengthen the outcomes of PPLCs. We further argue that local*

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*authorities should reinstate or restructure these meetings so that principals can focus on teaching and discuss the subject with their peers. Data for the study were collected through pre/post-surveys, in-depth interviews, reflection notes and audio recordings of workshops, world café meetings, a SWOT analysis, and group discussions.*

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## Introduction

This article is based on a study that explores how being part of a principal professional learning community (PPLC) may foster strong leadership for school development and teacher learning. Our study examines how participation in PPLCs may enhance the leadership development of principals, either by contributing to the development of teacher PLCs or through participation in an important transnational network. The participants have been part of HeadsUP, an Erasmus+ project involving peers from six countries that aims to provide more effective teacher development in schools by having the principals expand their leadership competencies within regional PPLCs. The study provides important insights into how different frameworks and cultures can impact the creation of and participation in PPLCs and impact opportunities for developing teacher PLCs.

The potential for professional learning communities (PLCs) to improve student learning is widely accepted (Hord, 1997, 2004; Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015), and their development and utilisation is high on the agendas of many European countries. Most studies related to these

communities focus on teacher PLCs and/or the role of leaders in the facilitation of teacher PLCs, thereby neglecting that the fundamental success of a school leader depends on the continuous development of leadership skills. Researchers who conducted the few studies that explored the participation of principals in PPLCs argued that the principals gain a greater understanding of the need for teacher PLCs and at the same time develop their own levels of professionalism (Gaudioso, 2017; Hipp & Weber, 2008; Hirsch & Hord, 2008; Miller, 2012). It is fundamental for the design of the PPLC to change from encouraging participants to merely build on their own experiences to encouraging them to elucidate those experiences with leadership theory and by actively using student learning data in their own development as leaders.

A common finding of studies that examined the importance of participating in PPLCs is that involvement in these activities is important for helping leaders to understand what a PLC is, which, in turn, increases their awareness about what is required to develop and maintain a PLC (Crestone & Jerome, 2009). By participating in PPLCs, school leaders gain insight into building a learning culture, which is important for developing PLCs in their own schools. Some studies show that participation in a PPLC helps principals assess and develop their own professional skills as leaders by providing the opportunity for them to reflect together with their peers on facilitating teaching, cooperation and pupil achievements in otherwise isolated, day-to-day affairs (Gaudioso, 2017; Hipp & Weber, 2008; Hirsch & Hord, 2008; Miller, 2012; Tupponce, 2018). Participation increases knowledge and builds skills so that pupil learning can be improved, but capacity across schools needs to be built to improve sustainability in all schools. By contributing to and supporting each other in a PPLC, the leaders performed better than

they could have done alone. Elmore and Burnay (1999) and Fink and Resnick (2001) highlighted the importance of restructuring meetings of the heads of schools so they can focus on teaching, giving them the opportunity to learn about and discuss pedagogical practices. However, few studies have investigated how PPLCs develop over time. In this study we followed a project that aimed to build PPLCs over time by having the principals expand their leadership competencies within both regional and transnational PPLCs. The key question guiding this study was: How does the participation of school principals in a PPLC foster strong leadership for school development and teacher learning?

### Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is based on theories generated through research on PLC. We first present main points from previous literature about PLC, before we present literature that is specific about PPLC. This forms a conceptual framework for the discussion of our findings.

PLCs are a powerful tool in school development and improvement, where the quality of education is highly dependent on teachers' continuous renewal of their professional knowledge and skills throughout their entire career (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Alethea, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). To ensure the effectiveness of PLCs, attention must be paid both to school leaders as mentors in the learning communities and to the special responsibility principals have in facilitating adequate learning conditions (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Schools that have developed a PLC culture share several characteristics: common values and vision, collective responsibility

for student learning, reflection and reflective professional examinations, individual and group professional learning experiences, and supportive and shared leadership (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, 1997; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Thus, a PLC can be described as a group sharing common goals, working together to reach those goals, assessing their progress, making necessary changes and holding themselves responsible for attaining their shared goals (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Heads of schools or principals can constitute a PPLC across schools with the purpose of developing as leaders, based on their obligations and professional responsibility for their pupils' learning outcomes (Talbert & MacLaughlin, 2010). School leaders are seen as change agents who are in the position to facilitate and support teachers' learning, lead development and create cultures that increase the quality of teaching and improve student learning (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016; Hallinger, 2003; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Tupponce, 2018).

Some studies have examined the importance of school leaders' participation in a PLC. The findings of those studies indicate that participating in a PPLC impacts a leader's understanding of what a PLC is, which, in turn, means that leaders increase their awareness of what is required to develop and maintain a PLC; further, by participating in a PPLC, school leaders can learn about and understand how to build a learning culture—knowledge that will benefit them when building PLCs in their own schools (David, 2009; Gaudioso, 2018). Fahey (2011) argued that leaders can increase their understanding of how to build learning-focused, reflecting professional communities by developing and participating in their own PPLCs, where they will work with models that show them how to reflect on learning in PLCs in their own schools. They can then

assess the leadership practice, de-privatise their own practices, give and receive feedback, and reflect on their own leadership role. Fahey (2011) stated this experience was precisely what they wanted to have in their own school.

Participation in a PPLC impacts the practices of leaders and their perceptions of PPLCs as unique arenas for learning about their own practices through a continuous process of reflecting together with other leaders on facilitating effective teaching, cooperation and pupil achievements in otherwise isolated, day-to-day affairs (Gaudioso, 2018; Hipp & Weber, 2008; Hirsch & Hord, 2008; Miller, 2012). It is important to understand what constitutes an effective PLC if the aim is to support PLCs in schools. This understanding is gained through participation in a PLC, because authentic and meaningful learning is important, and it is reinforced when learning takes place within one's own personal context (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014; Tupponce, 2018).

Hirsch and Hord (2008) maintained that participants in a PPLC learn because they can reflect together with other school leaders on challenges in their own schools and then collaborate to discover methods for overcoming the challenges. Together they can enhance their understanding of which learning processes can develop knowledge and skills in their own schools. Hipp and Weber (2008) researched the development of a PPLC for heads of schools across school districts; their study showed that participation increases knowledge and builds skills so that pupil learning can be improved, but capacity across schools needs to be built to improve sustainability in all schools. By contributing to and supporting each other in a PPLC, the leaders performed better than they could have done alone. Elmore and Burnay (1999) and Fink and Resnick (2001) highlighted

the importance of restructuring the meetings of the heads of school so they can focus on teaching, giving them the opportunity to learn about and discuss teaching. They were then expected to lead this type of discussion in their own schools. By structuring learning processes, a culture can be created where the heads of schools move from sharing problems to more actively discussing research literature and teaching practices (Austin, Grossman, Schwartz, & Suesse, 2007). Studying and reflecting on one's own experiences is a way of life, a lifestyle, Dickson and Mitchell (2014) claimed, but time must be set aside for meetings where this can be done; moreover, problem formulations that are connected to real problems are needed (Daniel, 2009).

'Learning is restricted to what the PLC members know and the skills they can share. This strategy is a quick and effective way to enhance learning as long as the competence to satisfy a need or a goal exists in the group' (Hirst & Hord, 2008, p. 34). On the occasion that expertise on a specific skill or in a certain knowledge area is lacking in the group, external support will be needed. Local authorities can play an important role in facilitating PPLCs so that leaders can develop their leadership by learning through experience and improving their skills (Gaudioso, 2017). Indeed, a number of studies have examined how advisors or mentors from the local administrative level contribute to enabling PLCs in schools (Dickson & Mitchell, 2014; Servais, Derrington, & Sanders, 2009).

Servais, Derrington and Sanders (2009) researched PPLCs through which heads of schools and advisors from the local administrative level developed individually and together. Relationships, time, structures and skills were important factors that needed to be addressed at the same time to develop a PPLC. The study

revealed that it was challenging to cooperate because the advisors were from a higher level, which prevented the heads of schools from freely sharing problems, frustrations and concerns; hence, it did not feel as meaningful and relevant to participate for all the heads of schools. The findings pointed out that the advisors had to see themselves as equals in a dialogic process where there was enough trust and support for open and authentic dialogue. Honig and Rainey (2014) examined how PPLCs with support from central administrative staff could contribute to transforming leaders into leaders of teaching. The study concluded that administrative advisors will be able to guide if they focus on teaching and are able to facilitate for learning rather than issuing directives.

### Methods

The current study is designed as an intrinsic case study, aiming to provide insight and understanding by thoroughly studying all aspects of a specific situation or phenomenon (Stake, 1995). In this study we examined one case, the HeadsUP project, an EU initiative funded by Erasmus+ that includes principals from Sweden, Austria, Germany, Cyprus, Spain and Norway together with participants from universities in the respective countries (except for Sweden, where there are school owners who participate together with their principals). The project's goal was for the principals to develop their expertise in leading teachers' learning and collaboration and structuring collaboration in their schools as PLCs.

#### **The project's guidelines state the following:**

*The principals who take part in a PLC receive valuable inputs for professional reflection by other members of their PLC as well as from experts and peers at transnational project meetings, leadership conferences and a learning platform.*

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*The transnational cooperation provides all participating principals with the opportunity to understand different school systems, see other possibilities of leading a school, and get new ideas for initiating learning activities from schools across borders. (HeadsUP, 2019, p.5)*

The project is organised according to a 'doubledecker' model, which involves principals of the different countries organised into regional PPLCs with the aim of developing their leadership skills. The concept of the double-decker is referred to as follows:

*When school development as well as teaching development takes place not only in PLCs on the school leaders' level but also on the teachers' level. The HeadsUP-Project aims at encouraging and supporting principals to work in PLCs and to familiarise with this method. Furthermore, HeadsUP aims at strengthening their leadership competencies and so enable them to guide their school's teaching staff into such cooperation among teachers, support them and build up the necessary structures, so that teachers can develop further their teaching competencies in a process of joint learning<sup>1</sup>.*

HeadsUP aims to give principals experience with methods that can support their work, while they work continuously in a PPLC to support their own and their peers' efforts to build structures for PLCs that support teachers in improving their skills for successful teaching and classroom management. Furthermore, the principals can benefit from the transnational exchange of perspectives on leadership and school improvement. In the end, the goal is for all of these steps to effect a change in day-to-day classroom work and for pupils to benefit from better teaching.

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<sup>1</sup>Quote from the Homepage of HeadsUP, downloaded from:  
<https://sites.google.com/site/plcheadsup/>

As part of the HeadsUP project, the participating principals were presented with different methods and theories during transnational seminars, as both principals and academics from each country brought examples and input to the seminars. They shared experiences with and expertise on communications skills, how to develop inquiry, studies on lessons and learning, problem solving processes, methods that enhance collaboration and relevant literature, all of which was presented on the HeadsUP website.

To capture the complexity of the case and strengthen internal validity, data were obtained from multiple sources (triangulation), a key feature of a case study (Stake, 1995). The data were collected through pre/post-surveys with principals and the teachers involved in the PLCs in each of the six countries, in-depth interviews with the principals who participated in the multiplier events and evaluations of each network meeting. In addition, data were obtained from reflective notes on audio recordings of workshops, world café meetings, a SWOT analysis and group discussions. The use of a wide range of data collection methods resulted in a solid data base. Quantitative data were primarily used to support and strengthen the other findings and, therefore, were not regarded independently or analysed in isolation. The survey data reflected a broad array of information, while the qualitative data contributed to comprehensive in-depth knowledge on the study topic. The qualitative data were analysed in two phases. First, all parts of the data were passed separately to create an open coding. Open coding is an analysis method derived from grounded theory, through which the constant comparative analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was developed. In the second phase, we categorised the codes across the entire data material. Through open coding we came up with four main categories: (1) leadership skills, (2) awareness and security in

their own leadership roles, (3) organisation and implementation of PLCs and (4) appreciating the importance of PLCs. The categories formed the structure of the presentation of the empirical findings.

### **Empirical Findings**

The aim of the study is to shed light on the research question: How does the participation of school principals in a PPLC foster strong leadership for school development and teacher learning?

#### **Leadership skills**

The development of several specific leadership skills were mentioned as outcomes of participation in a PPLC. A relatively high number of memos and notes in the data contain statements about how leadership skills can be developed by participating in a community with other principals in one's own country and about establishing a PLC in one's own school. During the transnational meetings, principals were presented with new tools and ways of working to create a learning culture; they also gained insight into the theoretical base on which the tools were based and had the opportunity to try out the tools together with their peers from the different countries. This positively impacted their motivation to continue working to develop a PLC culture in their respective countries and schools. A selection of quotes from participant statements reflecting leadership skill development during the PPLC follows:

- 'Bringing back home: Organisation and structure to make my teacher PLC even better. Use the experience from the principal PLC to a larger extent'.
- 'Cooperation and collaboration in teams generate change'.

- 'Give clearer structures to my teachers'.
- 'Giving and receiving feedback from colleagues is important'.
- 'Be more open and share'.
- 'Positive perspective of leadership and focus on learning'.

Several of the participants commented that they developed their communication skills by participating in the transnational meeting, as they received theoretical input and joined workshops focusing on communication and relational trust. Through this they learned to be more flexible and patient as leaders because they better understand the perspectives of others. They also said that by participating in a PPLC, their organisational and time management skills improved, and several stated that they simply improved in how they lead. Following are examples of statements about the positive outcomes of the PPLC that illustrate these points:

- 'Improving my communication skills thanks to PPLC'.
- 'Becoming more flexible, patient, empathic – to step into other people's shoes'.
- 'Manage time and help the group leader manage time'.
- 'Helps to develop my leadership skills'.

Data from questionnaires, evaluations and interviews with the HeadsUP participants indicated that by participating in a PPLC, the principals obtained a better understanding of how to be a learning leader and how to build a learning culture: both were pivotal to the creation of a PLC in their own schools. The importance of trust and relations in the transnational meetings was highlighted as very important by many in the evaluation notes and 'brought home' when regional PLC groups were to be launched and implemented. Many participants said that they have worked on establishing trustful

relations and on being active members of their own PPLC groups, while some were in the initial stages of implementing PLCs in their own schools.

What several participants mentioned is that the organisation and structuring of the networks involving school principals has transfer value for working with their own teachers and realising the importance of working in teams, while the collaboration with other school principals put a positive focus on learning.

#### **Awareness of and confidence in the leader role**

A recurring message from the data is that it is important for a principal's self-confidence to meet and discuss issues with other leaders, as this bolsters confidence in one's own decisions and improves skills in planning and coordinating teachers. The exchange of experiences and challenges through discussion in the PPLC groups, both regional and transnational, improved their ability to reflect on the choices a leader has to make. This sentiment was expressed by one of the German principals, who stated: 'Through the mutual exchange you get insight into the actions of colleagues. This promotes your own reflection.' Many memos and notes directly referred to principals' improvement of their self-confidence as leaders through participating in a PPLC:

- 'Meeting and discussing with other principals on a regular basis makes a difference for my self-confidence'.
- 'Increasing confidence in decision-making'.
- 'Knowing there's someone I can trust, talk to, ask questions, makes you more self-confident'.

In addition, some principals observed that they have become more aware of what is needed to achieve change. During an interview, a Swedish principal stated:

I have grown as a leader. I'm more self-confident. I dare to challenge my colleagues in a deeper way than before. I can be uncomfortable. I'm also better at giving feedback. I think I show them that I see that they grow as leaders. I'm challenging myself much more now than before. I think and reflect in another deeper way, and I know that I have to change in order to make a change.

All sections of the data material included references to the importance of speaking to school principals from other countries because those exchanges influence how the principals think about their own practices. Related excerpts from the reflection notes are provided below:

- 'Talking to principals from different countries makes me think a little bit differently about my own practices'.
- 'Similar challenges and solutions in different countries'.
- 'Many differences between the educational systems. Specific educational systems require different leaders'.
- 'Sharing experiences is inspiring and makes me look critically at my own leadership'.

During the interviews, some of the principals claimed that speaking with school principals from other countries, and, thus, gaining insight into other school systems, led to their increased reflection on their own practices. A German principal expressed this idea as follows:

The visits to other countries provide interesting and stimulating insights into the schools. The exchange with the school

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leaders from the other countries promotes our reflection on our own actions. This promotes personal development and strengthens the togetherness in Europe.

The principals became aware of similar challenges and solutions in the various countries, but also that in some ways issues they face are quite different. Several pointed out the importance of sharing experiences and being inspired to expand one's own perspective. Through input and practice, they learned about being open-minded and receptive to learning and change and felt they were better able to engage in reflective discussions about their own leadership with peers from different countries, which was important for their self-confidence, as it enhanced their decision-making skills. Furthermore, contemplation of their own PLCs was facilitated as a result of meeting and working with other European heads. Most of the school leaders needed time to develop their PPLC before they could implement a PLC for teachers.

#### *Organisation and implementation of a PPLC*

The evaluation notes show that the first transnational meeting was the first encounter many of the principals had with a PLC, as not all the participating countries had established the concept or practice of the PLC at that time. However, some of the participants articulated a good understanding of working with and in PLCs, but the data material on everyday school activities in their respective countries differs widely with regard to opportunities and forms of collaboration available. After the first transnational meeting, many reported that one develops a better understanding of PLCs after participating in discussions and reflecting on them; however, many reported a need for more input from experts.

The data material repeatedly mentioned the principals' strong interest in the structure and organisation of PLCs. Indeed, the evaluation notes contained multiple requests for more advice and tips on how to run a PLC group. How much time should be allocated, how often should meetings be held, how many professionals should participate, should notes be taken in special books, how should one lead the group: these are key questions to which many of the participants sought answers. At the second transnational meeting for HeadsUP, the principals received a better impression of how a PPLC can function, as they were presented with a structure for a PPLC meeting, which included viewing a film of a Swedish PPLC meeting that followed the structure; this segment of the program was highlighted as particularly instructive. One of the Swedish principals who used this structure for several years described it as follows:

We meet every other week for about two hours. We start every meeting with a one minute 'whining'<sup>2</sup> – every member gets a minute to talk about something that bothers him/her. I keep track of time. Then I tell them about the day's meeting; I sum up the activities of the previous meeting and check up on everybody's homework, who is going to speak, if we have some input and I set the time. The presenter of the day speaks, and the group members ask questions. If there are many questions, I keep track of whose turn it is. Fifteen minutes before ending the meeting, I summarise the day's meeting, and everyone reflects for themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Whining in this context refers to complaining or whining – as the principal explains it, it is about setting aside some time for participants to get things off their chest, discarding possible negative feelings they are concerned with there and then, and then proceeding with the topic for the day's meeting.

The session gave the principals ideas about how to structure a PPLC meeting. This structure was adopted by many of the participating principals and used in their regional PPLCs.

*Perception of the importance of PLC*

The data reveal many statements suggesting that the principals' participation in a PPLC helped them to identify ways to improve the structure and organisation of a PLC with teachers in their own schools:

- 'Getting to know important issues about PLCs, meeting regularly, the need for a group leader, and so on'.
- 'Experiencing the differences between countries makes it easier to see the possibilities in my organisation'.
- 'Structuring is something I have to do myself; reading about it alone is not enough'.
- 'Model the PLC structure and promote it to teachers – be a part of it'.
- 'Learning about structure and coordinating'.

Data collected through the interviews show that PLCs were in different stages of development in the various countries, and the data material provided some of the reasons for this. The need for practical advice on how to establish and operate a PLC was expressed: several participants were looking for good ideas and wanted to hear about the experiences and perceptions others had in developing PLCs in their own countries. For many participants, the first meeting was also their first encounter with other school systems, and time was spent acquiring information and becoming acquainted with the other participants' contexts.

Data from the evaluation form administered at the end of the second transnational meeting indicate that, after ten months, most participants had established or become part of a PPLC group in their home country after attending the first transnational meeting. Some also stated they developed deeper insight into the teacher's workday through participation in a PLC, which probably is contingent on having the school principal involved in meetings with the teachers. It has also been noted that some see the PLC as an opportunity to initiate team collaboration among teachers. Below are statements that reflect the ideas classified under this category:

- 'Take advantage of theoretical knowledge and translate into practice'.
- 'Transform through shared experience'.
- 'Discussions in PLC make problems visible'.
- 'Working together brings good exchanges and could bring teamwork to schools'.
- 'See challenges you otherwise may not have noticed or would have understood differently'.
- 'The positive experience in the principals' PLC helps to convince and to motivate teachers and will make teachers more focused and reflective workers'.
- 'Opportunity to grow to be a better teacher, to share and to help'.

The final main question in the interview concerned whether it was possible to see improvements in the pupils' learning outcomes due to work in PLCs. Most of the participating principals were only in the beginning stages of establishing a PLC culture in their

respective countries. Lack of time for teacher participation in a PLC was identified as a weakness in a SWOT analysis of PLCs conducted across Germany, Cyprus, Austria and Spain; the principals in those countries did not have the same level of control over the teachers' time outside of their teaching hours as did their colleagues in Norway and Sweden. One principal stated: 'The biggest problem with our PLC for teachers is time because the staff works with the children three afternoons a week, and so we try to organise our PLC meetings at lunch time'. For these reasons, and because the data available is still too limited, it is too early to draw conclusions on the effect of PLCs on student learning. A Norwegian participant said in an interview that while the implementation of the PLC has been beneficial for participating teachers, as it has been very positive to have an arena for shared reflection among a smaller group of teachers, it is still too early to say whether the reflection had impacted student learning.

### **Discussion**

The empirical findings show that many of the participants in HeadsUP believe they have developed their skills as leaders by joining the project, but what is even more important is that they feel they have developed a higher level of confidence and awareness in their leadership roles. They mention that discussions and debates with other principals, both during the transnational meetings and in their own regional PPLC networks, have given them confidence in their role as principal and that participation in HeadsUP has led to an increased level of self-confidence in personal decision-making. By far most of those who participated in the project have substantial experience as school leaders, so one may wonder why this project, in

particular, has apparently had so much influence on the self-confidence and self-awareness of these school principals. The answer to this question, in part, is found in the data, which tells us that established networks were not available to many of the participants prior to their joining a PPLC through the HeadsUP project. The empirical findings show that the availability of a network, a PPLC, with other school principals is perceived as a change that has positively contributed to their principalship, a change that has occurred quite quickly. This is aligned with previous research that views PPLCs as important to the development of principals' individual leadership skills and that underlines the need for principals to meet with peers and discuss both leadership and pedagogical issues (David, 2009; Gaudioso, 2018; Tupponce, 2018). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) asserted that professional learning communities consist of three core elements:

1) A community of teachers in a long-term relationship, 2) a learning community in which the driving force is commitment to improving the learning outcomes and welfare of pupils, and 3) professionalism, where collaboration-based decisions and improvements are inspired by knowledge and scientific findings.

Even if this description of a learning community is written with teachers in mind, it can, with minor adjustments, also define a PPLC. One may envision rewriting the core elements in this manner:

1) A community of school principals in long-term relationships, 2) a learning community in which the driving force is commitment to developing one's own leadership, thereby improving the learning outcomes and welfare of pupils and 3) professionalism, where collaboration-based decisions and improvements are inspired by knowledge and scientific findings.

Since, as the data shows, many of the principals had never before been in a professional community with other principals, it is easy to understand that they recognised the development potential in the HeadsUP project. In this context, we find an interesting additional perspective, offered by one of the German principals during an interview, that this project also strengthens the sense of European community – ‘the togetherness in Europe’. He undoubtedly had a good point. However, could the same effect have been achieved without taking part in a transnational leader network? Could the same effect have been achieved in one’s own country? The study shows that significant progress has been made through PPLC groups in the principals’ own countries. However, the material also shows that participation in the transnational network adds what is perceived as a very important dimension. As noted, the contextual perspective is a theme that is frequently referred to in the data material. The principals say that it is interesting and useful to obtain insight into school systems in other countries, seeing both similarities and differences, because it enables them to view their own practices in a new light. They see fairly large contrasts between the transnational and domestic systems. Responsibilities are different, and the roles of the school principals are different, even when they are basically doing the same type of job, as one principal put it. This suggests that the contrasts experienced by meeting, discussing and socialising with leaders from other countries and school cultures led to another type of self-awareness and another type of reflection than one normally has at home. The empirical findings also show that the school visits, which are part of the HeadsUP meetings, also contribute to this effect.

Other aspects of leadership skill development were also identified in this study. One refers to having input from experts

during the transnational meetings, where various topics on the development of PLCs are presented. Another is the idea that one should reflect together with other leaders, which is a core element of the PLC, according to Stoll et al. (2006), who claimed that professional learning communities are basically focused on developing a constructive collaboration culture. To enhance this, principals need sufficient time to meet, and the need for strong facilitators must also be considered if the participants are to move from sharing experiences to inquiring into readings and instructional issues with high-level conversations (David, 2009). Also, Earl and Timperley (2008) emphasised the quality of the cooperation as important for the outcome and observed that not all cooperation is necessarily of high quality. This is a major challenge to conducting effective PLCs, both for school principals and for teachers. How can good quality cooperation be secured so that it leads to development? DuFour and Reeves (2016) criticised that many schools in various regions of the world seem to have what we can call a light version of PLCs, or what they called a 'PLC Lite'. Perhaps the school leaders are just putting a new name on existing collaborative processes or meetings. If so, have they really taken the basic principles of a PLC to heart? In line with this, Levine (2008) distinguishes between 'teachers' professional communities' and 'professional learning communities (PLCs)', where the former exists in all schools and may be useful for understanding why change comes about more easily in some schools than in others. PLCs, on the other hand, are associated with positive changes and with the fact that, by definition, their aim is to improve pupils' learning outcomes. The organisation's culture must be developed over time to achieve a well-functioning PLC, and PLCs cannot be treated simply as the latest 'in trend' in education if they are to succeed. Irgens' (2007) understanding of the structure of an

organisation's culture is that, to affect the culture, the fundamental values and assumptions of the staff must be changed. However, impact on the deeper structures in the culture, the norms and fundamental assumptions, also comes from the top down. This means that our actions and their results may influence norms and behavioural rules in the culture and even the fundamental attitudes of individuals. Establishing PLCs that undertake knowledge-based rather than simply experientially based reflection will undoubtedly represent a change in the culture in many schools. This means that a school leader must strive to influence the values and basic assumptions of teachers, for example, by persuading them to learn about and acknowledge the importance of new knowledge and research, and also change some actions, for example, the organisation of working hours and meetings for teachers and the reading of relevant literature, which, in turn, may impact basic assumptions.

Many experienced school leaders use a diversity of perspectives and skills in the performance of their jobs (Wennes & Irgens, 2015). Based on the information in the data material, there is reason to be optimistic, seeing that the school principals who participated in HeadsUP are getting support for the establishment of good PLCs in their own schools. The knowledge and experience the principals gained through the project will help them to build their competence with the PLC concept. Timperley et al. (2007) underlined that external expertise may contribute to creating a more challenging dialogue when the teachers are to discuss teaching and learning because the outsider can lead them to ask other questions and add other knowledge to the discussions, thus challenging the underlying assumptions of the discussion. Transferred to this study, one can envision that the different contexts of these principals may contribute in this way by presenting a broader perspective in the discussions.

The empirical findings also show that the participants in HeadsUP are highly motivated to work with PLCs in their own countries. The importance of learning how a PLC can function is highlighted, and this creates motivation. Another finding is that the 'double-decker' model of the HeadsUP project works as intended. It was noted repeatedly in the data material that the principals see the learning and transfer value for their own school that can be gained from participating in a PPLC. Busch (2011) is interested in the significance of identification, common language, sense of belonging and values. With this understanding, participation in a PLC with other principals can be seen as having great importance (Gaudioso, 2017; Tupponce, 2018). School principals may experience reinforcement of their identity as school leaders, and through the meetings held as part of the HeadsUP project and participation in a PPLC, they may feel inspired to establish a PLC for their own teachers. The principals' need for knowledge about how to structure and organise a team that can become a PLC was reflected in key questions for which many participants sought answers – how much time should be allocated, how often should meetings be held, how many should participate, should notes be taken in special books, and how one should lead the group. They also inquired as to how to focus on communication skills and how to transform a community to a PLC that enhances professional development. Furthermore, they observed the added value of bringing in different perspectives – as transnational colleagues can do. Perhaps this is the case, if we take the principles of DuFour and Reeves (2016) relating to a 'genuine' PLC into consideration. This study indicates that it takes time and significant support to fully realise the potential of what a PLC is and might be, and as the study of Fink and Resnick (2001) highlighted,

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heads of schools need time in order to learn about and discuss teaching.

The contextual differences between countries that we see in the data material must signify that, for some of the participants, the introduction of a PLC will represent a paradigm shift for the majority of teachers at their school. One of the findings in this study is that the context within which the school principals run their schools differs considerably from one country to the next. Some of the principals from Spain, Austria and Cyprus stated that they had neither the means nor the authority to order teachers to collaborate due to work hour agreements, culture and tradition. With school leaders who may have adopted new perspectives through participation in HeadsUP, change is more than likely taking place. For others, change will be incremental rather than radical, which generally means refinement of existing structures and solutions. The Swedish and Norwegian school principals stated, for example, that they have the options and resources to further develop a collaborative culture that already exists among the teachers. Bolman and Deal (2014) indicated, however, that change may undermine the existing structural order, so there is a lack of clarity that may lead to distrust and confusion. The establishment of a PLC can be a strategy used to satisfy the initial goal of having teachers collaborate on planning, implementation and assessment of their teaching, which, in turn, leads to the pupils learning more and better (Helstad, 2015; Stoll et al., 2006b; Timperley et al., 2007). One could also argue that organising PLCs may be an operative goal in itself, as Hatch (2011) suggested, and sometimes the goals are established according to a well-developed strategy. There is no disagreement that the goal in school is that the pupils learn and develop. If these changes can be introduced as interactive learning

(Klev & Levin, 2009), there is good reason to believe that these pitfalls can be avoided.

### Implications

To succeed as a school leader, it is fundamental to continuously develop leadership skills. Our study underlines the importance for principals to meet peers in order to enhance their professional development as leaders. It also shows that facilitation and support by external experts may be needed in the beginning to create a structure and strengthen the outcome of a PPLC. We argue that principal meetings are often a neglected and forgotten arena for learning, and that local authorities should reinstate or restructure these meetings so that principals can focus on teaching and discuss teaching with their peers.

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