



Blended Mode at Work or a U-turn Ahead? Case of Professional Learning Communities in Rwanda

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Abstract: *Emerging professional learning communities (PLC) are judged to have a substantial assurance for capability and sustainable improvement in different domains and in education particularly. It has become a sizzling focus in many countries. In Rwanda, Professional Learning Communities for Sector Education Inspectors and their respective school head teachers are in place with initiatives of Rwanda Basic Education Board in partnership with VVOB-Rwanda and University of Rwanda-College of Education. The main objective of this paper was to explore the contribution of Professional Learning Communities in finding out solutions related to education problems in Rwanda starting from sector level through face to face and/or blended mode by PLC members. The framework by Rwanda Basic Education Board's PDSI process for Continuous Professional Development (where PDSI stands for Plan, Do, See and Improve) was used to explore PLC sessions practicability in structure of identification, planning, review and reflection. The data used for this work production were collected from sectors within 17 districts of Rwanda and were analyzed using impressionistic summary investigative method for researchers to mirror on what/how PLCs are conducted. The study exposed that the role of PLCs in Rwandan Education is of a considerable prominence. The point of view pull together to point out that no U-turn ahead for PLCs in Rwanda but that the concerned organs are to put their efforts together to sustain them at any mode of delivery whether face to face, blended or online mode.*

Keywords: *Blended mode, U-turn, Professional learning communities, Rwanda, impressionistic.*

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1. Introduction

With reference to VVOB-Rwanda training manual on Professional learning communities, VVOB together with its partners Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) and the University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE) are implementing a Multi-Year programme “Leading Teaching and Learning Together (LTLT)/ Umusemburo

w'Iremere ry'Uburezi Programme” (2017-2021) to continue promoting the quality of basic education through enhancing school leadership and setting up a school-based teacher support system through the induction of New Teachers. This programme focuses on advancing the implementation of the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) while supporting the improvement of learning outcomes.

As mentioned within VVOB-Rwanda training manual on Professional learning communities, the Sector Education Inspectors (SEIs) are the ones who are supposed to organize and facilitate effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers in their respective sectors as part of School Leaders' professional development. Kools & Stoll (2016) explain PLC as "an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve all students' learning".

For an effective PLC session, discussions should ideally be conducted, and it has to have purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, leadership and accountability as its key enablers (Katz et al., 2009; Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011).

As it is highlighted in this paper, the contribution of VVOB Rwanda through PLCs is reflected. The present paper's main objective was to investigate the ability of Sector Education Inspectors in conducting PLC sessions during lockdown period caused by Covid-19 pandemic. They had to ensure safe school environment to students and teachers during and post COVID-19 lock down. This was supposed to be shown by the results of PLC sessions conducted under the themes which were contextualized from the UNESCO toolkit on "Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts: A toolkit for school leaders". VVOB Rwanda used this toolkit to support school leaders in getting prepared for school reopening.

2. Literature Review

The word Professional Learning Community rooted from the United States around 1960s and became as hot cake around 1980s and early 1990s (Shields & Ramsey, 2006). Three years later, in 1993, Judith Warren Little and Milbrey McLaughlin, argued that effective schools and departments are the ones having strong PLCs done through Shared norms and beliefs, Collegial relations, Collaborative cultures, Reflective practice, ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice, Professional growth and Mutual support and mutual obligation (Segovia & Theorin, 2012). This is in line with what have been reported by Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage that the most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional learning communities in which educators are engaged in a collective effort to achieve a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning, create a collaborative culture to achieve the purpose and took collective rather than individual responsibility for the learning of all students (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993).

The literature informs that Professional learning communities are oriented in serving two main purposes. First, by skills and knowledge improvement of educators

by collaborative study, expertise exchange and professional dialogue and second by improving the educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment of students through stronger leadership (Stoll et.al, 2006).

Some researchers like Moore (2009) highlighted that professional communities have five elements to consider, namely: reflective dialogue, focus on student learning, interaction among teacher colleagues, collaboration, and shared values and norms. Those elements are reflected through reviewing student data, setting learning goals, reflecting on teaching practice, exploring resources to learn about new practices, and planning how to apply new learning (Graham, 2007).

The active professional learning community has a number of benefits like allowing educators opportunities to directly improve teaching and learning, building stronger relationships between team members, helping teachers stay on top of new research and emerging technology tools for the classroom and helping teachers reflect on ideas (Hellner, 2008, Hord, 1997).

As previously informed, the rationale for starting PLCs in Rwanda is one of the application of knowledge gained by school leaders who follow the school leadership diploma course supported by VVOB Rwanda, mainly focusing on five standard of effective school leadership. This has to take into consideration all Rwandan schools of formal education system with four main categories, namely: pre-primary education, primary education, secondary education and the tertiary education known as university education.

Rwandan PLC sessions have a journey which they follow when taking place. The journey requires identifying evidence-based challenges and implementing successful School Improvement Plans (SIPs) to overcome them through an action-oriented cycle developed in order to easily identify pressing school and sector challenges; develop effective School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that are aligned with the Sector Education Improvement Plan (SEIP) and PLC priorities; engage school leaders in effective sharing of best practices and learning from each other, supporting the implementation of the 5 standards of effective school leadership and to reflect on and disseminate best practices in school leadership amongst school leaders in different sectors. At the end of each PLC session, PLC members develop specific actions to be accomplished before the next PLC session.

3. Methodology

The Sector Education Inspectors, are considered as the key people who do analysis of school performance in their respective sectors. The data which are collected are used as basis of identifying gaps for areas to be improved in Rwandan Education.

As posted by Katz et al, (2009), for any PLC to be successful, it has to follow the six key enablers namely: purpose and focus, relationship, collaboration, inquiry, leadership and accountability. During the PLC session, participants have an aim of getting solution to challenges which hinder the quality of teaching and learning in the schools which are located in their respective sectors.

In the Rwandan context, an action oriented cycle was planned to identify pressing school and sector challenges; to develop School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that are

aligned with the Sector Education Improvement Plan (SEIP); to engage school leaders in sharing interesting practices and learning from each other and to reflect on and disseminating of best practices in school leadership. The cycle is ended after four PLC sessions (figure 1). PLC participants are to mention clear action(s) to be done before them to meet in the next PLC session. This is done by following what known as PDSI process is established by Rwanda Basic Education Board.

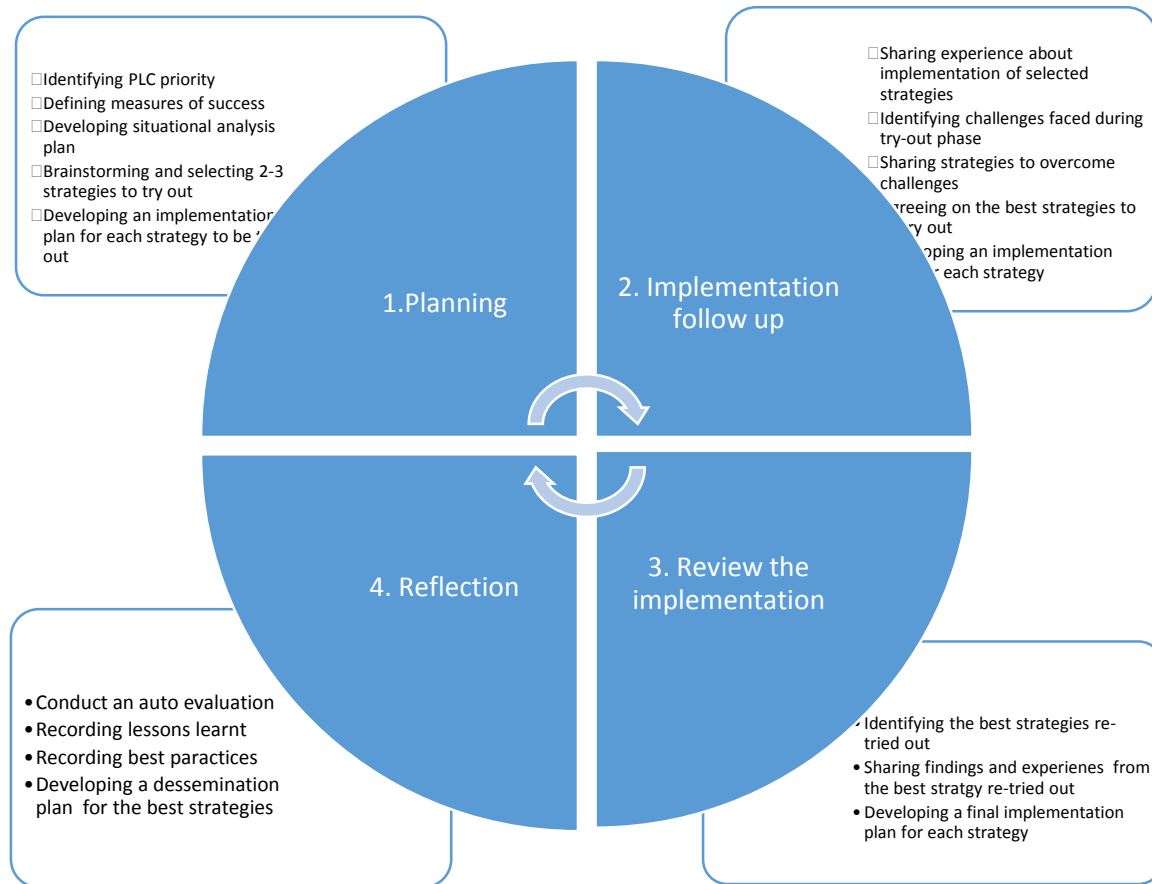


Figure 1: Action-oriented cycle for PLC consisting of 4 sessions from PLC training manual in Rwanda

The data used in this study, were collected during the online support which took place in July and August 2020 led by University of Rwanda College of Education (UR-

CE) facilitators. Seventeen districts took part in this study as shown in Figure 2.

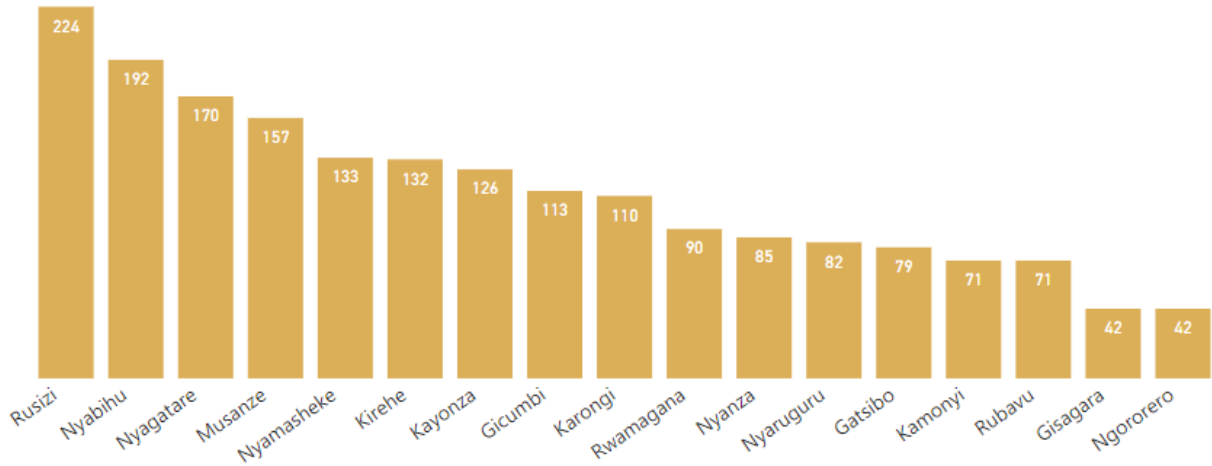


Figure 2: Participation of head teachers by district

In total, 1919 head teachers participated among which 32% were female head teachers. The average duration of the PLC session was 106.81 (in minutes).

Before the SEIs led the PLCs at sector level, there was an introductory day at District level where all Sector Education Inspectors (SEIs) got guidance from the UR-CE facilitators to shed light on the important activities that are included in sessions in the presence of DDE (District Director of Education) and DEOs (District Education Officers). On the introductory day at District level, UR-CE facilitators together with SEIs went through PLC steps session by session and step by step following PLC cycle. Besides, they analyzed the instruments/templates to be used during PLC session at sector level. The used instrument was much linked to the needed guidance by school leaders to ensure safe environment to students and teachers during and post covid-19 lock down. They were to find out strategies to guarantee school safety, school security and cleanliness of the school environment. Besides, they had to ensure that the online teaching-learning are to be an ongoing activity plus the preparation for the schools reopening which was planned in September 2020.

To analyze the data, impressionistic summary investigative method was used. This was done after fulfilling all the ethical considerations like having an official authorization letter from REB for conducting such support.

4. Results and Discussion

The main results in this paper reflect that 84.4% managed to attend the planned PLC activities whereas 15.6% of the expected participants were not able to join the sessions. The reasons behind the absence were ICT device issues and limited time to attend. Based on the fact that these online sessions were new mode of conducting PLC activities, it cannot be seen as a shame since more than 80% of PLC participants attended.

The information collected on the utilization of key enablers confirmed that the participants have not got difficulties in using them. By using a scale of 1 to 5, the figure 3 was produced.



Figure 3: Scale of 1-5, on how difficult was to apply the key enablers

One of the interesting point was that during the conducted PLC session, participants did not encounter difficulties in sharing leadership. This is enhanced by their collaboration capacities which was rated at 4.21. The key enabler which was rated less is the one of inquire determination which was rated at 80%.

Different ICT tools were used by PLC participants for them to be able to have online sessions. It could be possible to have a participant who was combining different means to participate in one session. Some were

used by all participants like WhatsApp, whereas others like telephone calls were used by 76% of the participants. Other means used included: emails, Microsoft teams, Telegram WebEx and Conference call.

Taking reference to figure 4, more than 82% of the PLC participants confirmed that the conducted PLCs were successful.



Figure 4: Average successfulness of the PLC session

The above confirmation is related to the ways PLC participants managed to discuss and to put into practice the guiding questions which were proposed to them to be foundation of their reflections during the lockdown period.

As previously informed, the PLCs conducted were focusing on some specific questions which were related to measures against Covid-19 pandemic and on what schools

were doing to prepare the new normal mode of learning, which is teaching and learning during Covid-19 pandemic time. They were to find out strategies to guarantee school safety, school security and cleanliness of the school environment. Besides, they had to ensure that the online teaching-learning are to be an ongoing activity plus the preparation for the schools reopening, which was planned in September 2020.

The results confirm that the adoption of six key enablers helped the SEIs and Head teachers to form a supportive team of educational leaders in their respective sectors in order to improve teaching and learning at their own schools. This was shown by their response during the fourth PLC session that collected the lesson learnt from PLC practices and the best practices that can be shared to other colleagues. According to the response of Head Teachers and SEIs, the six key enablers were applied at different levels. Four out of six key enablers were applied at the level of 85%. Those include sharing roles and responsibility during PLC session (Leadership), engagement in mutual support in investigating their practices and identification of results for improvement (Collaboration), questioning their leadership practices to improve the teaching and learning practices in their own schools (Inquiry), respecting each other and sharing information about their teaching and learning failures and success (relationship). On the other hand, the PLC members responded that two out of six key enablers need more improvement. Those key enablers are accountability and purpose and focus. This signals that the PLC members might have not taken each other accountable for the implementation of the decisions taken during PLC sessions at the satisfactory level. In addition, some PLC members mention that the time management during PLC session and the focus on the objective of the session was difficult to adopt. It is possible that the PLC members were discussing without taking time into consideration. Despite the two key enablers which needed to be improved, the four key enablers were adopted and used for effective facilitation of PLC.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The information reflected in this study showed that the PLC participants attended the virtual session at a satisfactory level. The SEIs were able to apply the PLC key enablers during the PLC session and the dimensions which were given to guide the school re-opening guided the PLC discussions at a very good level. The conducted PLCs sessions were successful and the researchers are confident to conclude that the results predicted that there is no U-turn ahead on Blended mode in relation to use of PLCs in Rwanda.

However, PLC members reported some wishes that could have been done differently for PLC session to be more successful. The mentioned elements are that for PLC session to be more successful, there should be regular follow-up for the implementation of PLC activities through peer learning. School visits are to be organized to learn from one another on a rotational basis. They suggested a strong collaboration between PLC members and the parents as well as the calendar of activities to PLC members to be respected to allow the implementation of PLC activities without collision of other activities. Additionally, PLC members should be given additional time for implementation of activities. All PLC members should have been active at the same level in PLC a discussion. They further suggested Auto- evaluation of every PLC session and regular monitoring of PLC activities. In some sectors, they further revealed that it could be successful if all primary HTs get involved in PLCs because of the nature of various priorities that are common to both primary and secondary schools. They also suggested to increase the time of PLC sessions from 120 to 140 minutes.

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