

## **Professional Learning Community (PLC) as an Effective Strategy for Improving Teachers' Professional Practice: Implications to Educational Planning.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined the need to improve teachers' professional practice through instituting Professional Learning Communities (PLC). This is done in consideration of the downward trends in the academic performance of students over the years which may be related to the teacher factor. A teachers' PLC comprises a group of individuals whose primary focus is to continuously work together for better performance in their duties as educators, with a resultant improvement and or betterment of the learners. The meaning of PLCs, issues involved in the setting up of PLCs, roles of stakeholders in a PLC, educational benefits of PLCs, and implications to educational planning are considered. The paper strongly recommends the formation of teachers' PLCs as a means of empowering teachers or boosting their performance toward the improvement of students' achievement.*

**Keywords: Effective strategy, improving, Professional learning community, professional practice, teachers.**

### **Introduction**

The premium given to education as the root of human capital development and as a veritable instrument for social and economic development makes one to be agitated over any report of poor academic performance of students at any level of education. Poor academic performance hinders progress and makes life less meaningful. The students who are the leaders of tomorrow may have a bleak future due to poor performance. The causes of poor academic performance and how to tackle them, therefore should be intentionally addressed. There are pieces of evidence to show that indeed students' academic performance is not as it should be. Information from the Education Sector Review for Nigeria (2007) revealed that the percentage of candidates having at least a credit (C) in five or more subjects in the Senior Certificate Examination (SSCE) has been on a decrease in recent years, with only 49.4% of candidates scoring five or more credits in 2006, compared to 59.9% in 2005. The statement by Rufai (2011) that 'one cannot celebrate the 30.9% pass this year in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination as against the 23% pass recorded the year before, because it is still a mass failure' buttresses the fact that poor performance is a source of worry to well-meaning Nigerians. World Bank Report (2019) apparently in support of this revealed that primary completion rates have stagnated, and secondary enrolment rates are declining.

More worrisome is the fact that employers often question the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes of most university graduates. Questions such as, 'How can a graduate from a university fail to make simple correct sentences in the English language?' Why is it that an electrical engineer cannot correct simple electrical faults?', How come a mechanical engineer cannot fix minor problems in the car?', and so on are often asked. A reason that can be adduced from this unfortunate situation is that learning in the classroom which should be geared to real-life situations is not always so, hence most

graduates cannot put into practice what they claim to have learned. Learning in the real sense is said to take place only when what is taught in the classroom can be applied in real-life situations. When this happens, it is assumed that quality education has occurred, a situation that Mamman and Joel-Piwedden (2006) described as education that is relevant and tied to societal needs. Turker (2016) asserted that there should be a more authentic, hands-on approach to education that connects what students learn in school with the real world. Siegel (2019) opined that every child can learn but not all children learn the same way because of individual differences. It is the responsibility of educators, therefore, to make this a reality for every child. The teacher, therefore, is viewed as the trustee of the learner as far as the business of educating him is concerned.

This simply means that attention should be paid to the role of the teacher and teaching in the educational process. The statement in the National Policy on Education (2004) that no education system can rise above the quality of the teacher adds credence to this. Zhao (2014) argued that the teacher is indispensable in the educative process despite the wonders of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Mamman and Joel-Piwedden have the belief that the heart of any successful learning programme is the informed teacher, and stated that if the child is the centre of the education system, then the teachers are the hub of the educational process; for it is based upon their number, their education, and training, their quality and devotion to duty, their effectiveness and efficiency, their competence, and their productivity. Sokan (2009) opined that continuous teacher training and development is required if teachers are to adequately cope with the demands of the new secondary school education curriculum which captures the demands of a changing society.

Teachers have a stake in the success of our educational system and should be empowered to strategize for the betterment of education. They should be encouraged to develop professionally and to be committed to their work. Educational reforms which include changes in class size, curricula, school headship styles, teaching methods, and socio-economic reconfiguration are good but may not be sustainable unless the professional development of the teachers is seen as a priority. The environment in which the teachers operate is bedeviled with various limitations, which if removed, will have a tremendous impact on the classroom. Just as teachers strive to develop themselves professionally, there is a dire need for them to be concerned about improving students' academic performance. Hence, Denwigwe and Ngwu (2022) pointed out the need for exercises that promote the inculcation of the right attitude among youths (students) to be encouraged.

Considering the above scenario, some pertinent questions emerge such as: 'What has gone wrong?', what can be done to improve teachers' professional practice which will result in a concomitant improvement in academic performance as well as translate to functional education?' Functional education is that which is tied to societal needs or used in real life situations. Denwigwe, Elumeze, and Otu (2014) described it as the type of education that will address the needs of the child and help him to become self-reliant, and that it is the best type of education. There should be in place an opportunity or a programme to impact the quality of teaching and thereby improve academic performance. It is against this background that this paper suggests the need to improve the professional practice of teachers through the formation of teachers' professional learning communities.

### **The meaning of a professional learning community**

A professional learning community is a group of professionals whose members are united in their commitment to achieving a stated vision or objective. Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker (2004) described it as a group of people often educators or professionals in a particular field who work together to improve their skills and knowledge. Usually, its focus is to make room for members to have an avenue where they can work hand in hand with one another. They carry one another along in their pursuit of a common goal, part of which is to encourage best practices.

The focus of the group determines the issue of commitment. Whereas the commitment in the field of medicine would be improved health delivery, that of education would be improved learning. In other words, there are different types of PLCs but for this paper, the emphasis was on Teachers' PLCs. The teacher's PLC in the opinion of Brooks (2018) is a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. It is an organizational arrangement in schools that helps teachers to be in working groups that foster collaborative learning. The professionalism in the PLCs connotes the use of distinct knowledge to address the needs of a client while the community deals with caring, support, and reciprocal obligation among group members. That is to say that collaboration is the key substance in a community.

A teachers' PLC is an avenue that brings teachers to learning, problem-solving, research, and so on. It is a teacher-based forum that can be at the level of the school or a group of schools to improve teachers for greater effectiveness and promotion of active learning. It is an effective teacher development approach and a powerful strategy for improving school performance. The PLCs emphasize factors that promote learning such as relationships, shared ideas, and strong culture. The members see themselves as learners who must ask questions, investigate, and proffer solutions to come up with strategies for improved teaching. Senge (2006) asserted that there is no hierarchy of who knows more than someone else but rather the need for everyone to contribute.

The PLC can serve as a relationship between the teachers and administrators which leads to shared leadership in the school where all grow professionally and learn to view themselves as people committed to a common goal. Talking about commitment, every member has an inner inspiration to work collaboratively without someone dishing out orders as to what to do. All the members are carried along as diverse ideas are shared, and compromises are made where necessary. The members are spurred to work zealously for the attainment of desired goals. For example, in a PLC, the teachers are particularly concerned about the issues that prevent students from learning such as abstraction, lack of standard evaluation technique, rigidity in teaching, intellectual approach (i.e. not minding whether there are other approaches), boring tasks, fear, inability to connect, inadequate use of imagery (no imaginative ability), inability to act, error, blackout, and so on. They then try to figure out how to overcome these challenges.

### **Setting up a Professional Learning Community.**

Looking at the PLC as a way of purposefully gathering teachers with common interests and ideas to improve their professional practice, a lot of caution must be exercised in its establishment. Dufour (2004) suggested that in creating a PLC, one should focus on learning rather than teaching, and the emphasis should be on collaborative work so that everybody sees himself as being accountable for results. To set up a PLC Ermer and Cimarusti (2017) suggested that PLCs should foster a collaborative culture among teachers, staff, administrators, and parents, and they should have a clear mission and vision for improving student learning. Kruse (2009) and Albritton (2011) added data-driven decision-making, ongoing professional development for teachers, and a system-thinking approach to problem-solving and improvement to these attributes.

This boils down to the fact that in setting up a PLC, a clear vision of what education is all about should be shared. Every member of the group (whether the PLC is school-based or cluster-based) shares in the vision. To achieve this common vision or goal calls for collaborative efforts. Asher and Leavy (2019) revealed that collaborative efforts seem difficult to organize and sustain at first but under the PLC model, small groups work together within a larger group, the collaborative teams can be organized as either academic grade levels or any other sub-groups that can work well within the framework of what the PLCs hope to achieve. It is through commitment and the creation of a shared vision that the team is empowered to work together and achieve goals. School-based PLCs can conveniently meet at weekends to prepare lesson plans and decide on which instructional material to use while teachers at the schools

in a cluster can meet monthly or during the holidays to share experiences and to rub minds on how best to teach and learn.

### **Stipulated Roles of Stakeholders**

For the teachers' PLC to achieve its objectives, every stakeholder must effectively perform his or her stipulated role. Every role should address the issue of improving students' learning. According to Walters and Bolin (2020), the stakeholders in a PLC should include the school leaders (principals, assistant principals, and departmental chairs), members of staff, parents, students, Community members, and school board members. The principal and teachers as the major stakeholders should work collaboratively. According to Hordes and Summers (2008), the fact that responsibility and authority are distributed and shared between the principal and the teachers serves as the motivating catalyst in a PLC. The principal's basic roles in a school-based PLC as suggested by Morr, Stevens, and Arstensrud (2015) are as follows: (i) Focusing on the learning of students of students and teachers. (ii) Fostering the development of a collaborative culture. (iii) concentrating monitoring and assessments on intended results. (iv) Providing and allowing for timely and relevant collaboration among the PLC membership concerning the vision.

Cormier and Oliver (2000) citing Dufour and Eaker (1998) outlined the following as what the principal should do to keep a PLC going. (a) The principal should be able to model the shared vision and values rather than simply referencing rules and procedures. (b) The principal should be able to involve faculty members in meaningful decision-making processes associated with student learning and instruction as well as empower the individuals to act upon those decisions. (c) The principal should be able to communicate effectively with the PLC membership by providing the staff with information, training, and parameters they need to make decisions that will benefit student learning. (d) The principal should be able to establish credibility by modeling behaviour that is congruent with the vision and values of the school. (e) The principal should be result-oriented in monitoring and delivering feedback regarding the PLC's programme.

As the principal plays these roles arduously, the school is pushed to greater heights in terms of discipline and academic performance. The roles of teachers in a PLC as outlined by Eaker, Dufour, and Dufour (2002) are as follows: (a) Acknowledging and embracing collaboration with colleagues. (b) Making every effort to understand and enact the school's PLC concepts. (c) Actively engaging in the development of the shared vision and values. (d) Communicating the school's vision and values mission to students. (e) Striving towards a vision of excellence and choosing to become an expert. (f) Merging individual goals with the PLC's short-term and long-term goals. (g) Engaging in research-based and data-driven plans. (h) Expecting and participating in a continuum of learning. The principal can be described as a communicator, collaborator, coach, change agent, capacity builder, and coordinator concerning his functions while the teacher serves as a practitioner and a leader (Cormier & Oliver, 2009).

### **Educational Benefits of PLCs.**

The educational benefits are many. They make for increased knowledge and skill. They foster better communication and cooperation. PLCs help members to be more motivated and to derive satisfaction from what they do. Moak and Noll (2016) summarised the benefits of PLCs as increased collaboration and teamwork among the teachers, improved teaching and learning practices, increased focus on student achievement and progress, and improved school culture and climate. Swain-Price and Hudson (2017) opined that the results of PLCs are tremendous in terms of authentic instruction, student achievement, and teacher empowerment. This simply means that PLCs are good strategies for improving the quality of academic delivery which will in turn impact students' performance. Fullan (2001) points out that several students have given credence to the fact that PLCs or collaborative work

cultures at the school and ideally at the district level are critical for the implementation of attempted reports.

PLCs enable teachers to explore ideas, acquire and build up information as well as questions and solve problems. Through the PLCs, teachers who are proficient in information Communication and technology (ICT) groom others since ICT is one thing that turns the world into a global village. PLCs provide opportunities for the few teachers in subject areas like cultural and creative arts to stimulate creativity in others bearing in mind that we can impact the world through creativity. It helps teachers not to teach in abstraction. As they learn together, they can even identify gaps in the curriculum and proffer solutions. They become better able to infuse into their teaching certain elements that will enable their students who are great Nigerians of tomorrow to have the right entrepreneurial skills needed to face the challenges of a growing society. Denwigwe and Akpama (2013) asserted that the adolescent period is saddled with certain developmental problems. Hence, teachers should be mindful of this while dealing with students.

What teachers gain from the PLCs can help them place their students at a competitive advantage with their international peers. The forum can model effective teaching online or offline to meet the needs of members using collaborative learning activities. Discussions are always interactive using practical demonstrations, brainstorming, debating, peer observations, feedback, coaching, and mentoring. In other words, under the PLC, groups of teachers work together to plan their lessons and the relevant instructional materials to use. As they share their experiences, they come out with alternative ideas with which to solve problems such as students' disciplinary matters. This is because as revealed by Denwigwe and Mbotto (2022) the school should be a place for grooming the total child who would be complete mentally, physically, and socially.

### **Implications to Educational Planning**

Educational planners have a great responsibility towards making teachers adopt best practices that will improve their professional practice and so translate to better academic performance of the students. They should encourage teachers to come together and plan their lessons through sharing ideas, experiences, and skills. They should carry out awareness or enlightenment programmes that will expose teachers to the realization of the need to collaborate in the planning and implementation of programmes that will enhance their educational and professional practice. They should also let the teachers know that one of the benefits of working collaboratively is that their self-esteem is boosted. As Denwigwe, Tolorunleke, and Elumeze (2017) aptly put it, self-esteem is the extent to which one feels confident, valuable, and respectful to himself, which in turn influences his well-being.

The educational planners must impress upon the teachers the need to establish and maintain teachers' PLCs so that they can work together to plan lessons and instructional materials and be in touch with current pedagogical skills. In addition to recommending the establishment of PLCs, educational planners should encourage the school administrators, government, and significant others to provide a conducive environment for teachers which will motivate them to work better. Denwigwe, Eke, and Ngwu (2022) emphasized that amenities like health facilities, good schools, good roads, constant electricity, and potable water coupled with security, employment opportunities, and easy means of livelihood immensely contribute to meaningfulness in life.

### **Conclusion**

The teachers' professional learning community (PLC) is an avenue that will promote best practices among our teachers. It will expose them to current knowledge and skills which will, in turn, improve students' overall academic performance. Teachers as members of a PLC and as change agents should be sufficiently knowledgeable, with a sense of commitment to their job. When teachers approach their duties with the right attitude, their professional practice yields significant results. PLC is seriously

recommended as a worthy venture in addressing the problem of poor academic performance among students.

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