

## IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING OUTCOMES THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES - A CASE OF BUSINESS EDUCATION SUBJECTS IN BOTSWANA

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could help to improve the teaching and learning outcomes of business education subjects in Botswana secondary schools. A qualitative methodology was adopted and data were collected online through WhatsApp chats and calls. Through analysing interviews and reviewing of documents related to PLCs in schools, we were able to code data into categories that emerged from themes and that assisted in understanding the perceptions and practices of teachers. The findings of this study indicate that through the implementation of PLCs in school there is a likelihood of improved learning outcomes amongst students due to collaborative efforts amongst teachers in lesson preparations and classroom instruction.

**Keywords:** Professional learning communities, Collaboration, Student achievement, Professional development.

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### INTRODUCTION

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) tend to be a concept that has not been internalized in the Botswana education system. Teachers experience isolation in the classroom, a situation which is a barrier to building effective collaborative relationships that can be an effective, productive and authentic platform for embedded professional development for professionals (Morgan, 2010). In that way, teaching tends to be a lonely profession whereby much of the work is performed in isolation from professional colleagues (Bhushan, 2013; Neto, 2015). Most teachers prefer working alone rather than with others. It has been found that success in classrooms can be enhanced if there are teams that work together in order to boost student achievement (Feger & Arruda, 2008; Iloanya, 2014; Kohl, 2014; Neuzil, 2010; Reeves, 2006; Stewart, 2017; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Overview of Professional Learning Communities

In Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), a group of teachers would meet on a regular basis to share ideas and work together with the aim of improving their teaching skills (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). The aim is to enhance the teaching roles that are interdependent such as team teaching, integrated lesson, teaching monitoring and empowerment (Gomendio, 2017). It is necessary for schools to become learning organizations aimed at building teacher capacity in order to be effective in continuous professional development (Bhushan, 2013; Krammer, Rossmann, Gastager, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2018). The learning organizations are important because school leaders cannot manage change on their own hence the need to introduce PLCs that would immensely help in the development of teacher's skills, leading to improved learning outcomes of students hence a general improvement of a school's performance rate, if the teams are appropriately managed (Balyer, Karatas, & Alci, 2015; Gumus, Bulut, & Bellibas, 2013; Lipscombe, Buckley-Walker, & McNamara, 2020; Szczesiul & Huizenga, 2014; Vanblaere, & Devos, 2016). PLCs can help teachers innovate in the classroom leading to a possible improvement in student outcomes (Miller, 2020). In addition, PLCs give rise to an increased understanding and meaning of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in student achievement

as they promote teacher-led inquiry practices where teachers and administrators interact, collaborate, and share instructional knowledge and practices (Gumus et al., 2013; Orr, Hall, & Hulse-Killackey, 2008; Vanblaere et al., 2016). The approach is developed in order to provide staff with career development opportunities, which is done by improving the structural setup such as time, space to meet and talk together.

#### Professional Learning Communities

PLCs approach is one of the many structures that bring educators together so as to improve student learning which is brought about by teacher collaboration. PLCs are about collaborative initiatives by a group of teachers who are committed to work as a team in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning by sharing knowledge and ideas and critically interrogating their practice as an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting approach (Watson, 2014). Miller (2020) notes that it is only when teachers try out new strategies that they may know which ones work best for their students. However, there are various models of PLCs (Hassan, Ahmad, & Boon, 2018) which may help reduce teacher isolation "teaching through collegial and open dialogue, exchanging ideas and sharing experiences, debating issues and techniques, and by experimenting" (Kools & Stoll, 2016, p.6). All this is geared towards improved student performance due to teamwork. Collaboration between teachers encourages them to create new innovative ways of teaching, which could help improve student learning outcomes (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016). In this way, teachers learn through collective inquiry, which could help them to be effective in achieving their goal, which is student improved learning (Brucker, 2013; DuFour & DuFour, 2010; Kools et al., 2016). Students' academic achievement is related to teacher's teaching quality; hence effective PLCs are capable of enhancing teacher's teaching quality, which consequently contributes to sustainable advancement in students' learning (Harris & Sass, 2011; Pirtle & Tobia, 2014; Schmuck, 2009).

#### Professional Learning Communities and teacher's professional development

In PLCs, teachers take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented and growth-promoting approach towards the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning (Livingston, 2017) hence develop in their professional teaching activities. Opfer and Pedder (2011) observe that schools need to be viewed as learning organizations that offer the conditions that optimize and sustain teacher learning which would consequently

lead to students' improved academic performance. In this way, teacher competency is improved through effective professional development provisions as they become more salient (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Tam, 2015) and where "teacher's professional development can have a positive impact on student performance and teacher's practice" (Kools et al., 2016, p.3). This can effectively be done by adopting pedagogical shifts that meet the needs of students as well as improving their diverse learning experiences. When teachers are able to work with and learn from one another within and across different grade levels, they could share practices and also try new ways of teaching, and by so doing, they are more likely to succeed in addressing classroom practice challenges (Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Tam, 2015). Collaborative professional development experiences provide opportunities for teachers to discuss concepts, skills and problems that intimately relate to their teaching (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). This leads to an observation made by Lipscombe et al. (2020) that "collaboration is seen as an important component of professional development and the overall intellectual capital of the school" (p. 374).

The quality of teachers is generally regarded as having the most significant influence on student learning outcomes after home background (Hattie, 2012). Meiers, Buckley & Knight (2010) note that the establishment of professional learning communities has been found to be effective in building skills, knowledge and heightening innovation amongst teachers who are working in teams. This is the case since team members share and reflect on their practice and personal experiences, observe each other's practices and apply them in their daily classroom teaching (Sather & Barton, 2006) and possibly report back to the team. Engagement in collective learning and inquiry allows teachers to find common ground (DuFour et al., 2008) with respect to classroom practice. According to Berry, Daughtrey & Wieder (2009), teachers are most effective when given the time and tools to collaborate with peers since it is during this time that teachers grow professionally and learn how to provide students with high-quality instruction (Balls, Eury, & King, 2012). In addition, teachers who have consistent opportunities to work with effective colleagues also do improve in their teaching effectiveness (Berry et al., 2009). Jones, Stall and Yarbrough (2013) note that there is value in collaborating since the emphasis on effective use of instructional strategies and practices as well as focusing on the needs of learners is paramount. It is therefore clear that when teachers collaborate, they would possibly identify the abilities and challenges of the different students. For example, Sigurðardóttir (2010) conducted a study that showed a strong relationship between professional learning communities and school effectiveness shown through students' improved performance since teachers were willing to collaborate with each other with the sole aim of improving the learning outputs and outcomes of students which leads to a general school improvement. A study by McKinsey (2007) on the world's best-performing school systems confirms the importance of the teacher and that one main way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction conducted by an effective teacher.

#### **Professional Learning Communities and teacher efficacy**

In understanding PLCs, there is also teacher efficacy which Donohoo (2017) describes as a staff's shared belief that through their collective action, they can positively influence student outcomes, including those who are disengaged or disadvantaged. Therefore as per the demands of PLCs, working with peers to design lessons and assessment tools can improve efficacy by increasing the pedagogical options available to teachers (Miller, 2020). In that way, the teacher's self-efficacy is enhanced since they can have a sense that they are able to plan, organize, and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Stephanou, Gkavras, & Doukeridou, 2013). However, there are challenges that can affect the successful implementation of PLCs, such as too much time spent in discussions, rigid personalities where one does not want to change, risking humiliation and discouragement at possible failures, thinking

that one is doing more work for the same salary (Chou, 2011; Hughes-Hassell, Brasfield, & Dupree, 2012). There is a possibility that if these challenges could be overcome, then student learning outcomes could improve.

#### **Professional Learning Communities and action research**

Action research through a professional learning community approach can be done in order to create an intervention that will positively affect students' learning and enhance their academic achievement (DuFour et al., 2008; Mahimuang, 2009; Thessin & Starr, 2011) and this includes jointly producing knowledge (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007). That is why Mamlok-Naaman (2018) notes that "action research is an inquiry into teacher's work and their students' learning in the classroom (p. 27) aimed at change and improving classroom practices. In that way, teachers, through their interaction with one another, enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge leading to improved students' performance. So, in action research teachers reflect on their own actions aimed at improving their own practice while being focused and systematic in doing so (Ferrance, 2000; Johannesson, 2020; Koshy, 2010; Molosiwa & Mokhupadhyay, 2017).

Furthermore, reflection is of primary importance in action research since the researcher is both a participant and an implementer in all phases of the classroom-based research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Thus, teacher participation in research helps them to be more open towards new ideas (Jensen et al., 2016; Schmuck, 2009). When PLCs engage in action research, the aim is to collaboratively find solutions to a concern done through sharing experiences, aimed at enhancing effectiveness in classroom instruction and learning (Joyce, 2016; Kristmanson, Lafargue, & Culligan, 2011).

#### **Statement of the problem**

What we observed is that teachers do not usually work together and rarely support each other in schools; for example, the only time they tend to be in contact with each other is when they are assigned a task as a group, something that usually catches them unaware. In public schools, teachers would only start preparing their schemes of work, lesson plans and records of work done when they are reminded that they will be assessed. It is during this time that teachers start seeking assistance and advice from their colleagues since they are embedded in a culture of working in isolation. In Botswana, professional development activities that are aimed at meeting the needs and demands of teachers are not sufficient at best and at worst rare, hence they feel ill-equipped to work together to ensure that all learners have access to the skills and experiences.

We further noted that teachers do not have the motivation to co-teach in order to learn from each other and also that most of the time teachers do not evaluate themselves after lessons so as to share their experiences with each other and if they do they rarely share their experiences. It also has to be noted that most research on teacher professional development rarely considers how students' learning is embedded in the professional lives and working conditions of teachers (Cordingley, 2015). School leaders could play a critical role in creating a culture of collaboration, yet they rarely promote PLCs in their institutions. Therefore, this study sought to investigate how PLCs could help improve the teaching and learning outcomes of business education subjects in Botswana secondary schools.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How would PLCs improve the students' learning outcomes if implemented in schools?
2. What are the views of teachers regarding the implementation of PLCs in their teaching?
3. What are the possible challenges faced by teachers and administrators when implementing PLCs?

#### **METHODOLOGY**

We adopted a qualitative methodology which provides deeper meaning and understanding (Levitt, Moulouky, Wers, Morrow, &

Ponterotto, 2017) on how PLCs could help improve the teaching and learning outcomes of business education subjects in secondary schools if teachers collaborated in lesson preparation and actual classroom instruction. Since we employed a case study, we were able to closely examine the data within a specific context (Zainal, 2007); in this case, it was the school setting.

#### **Sampling procedure and participants**

Due to the Covid 19 health protocols, interviews were done using WhatsApp chats and calls since we could not physically go to the school from which we had initially arranged to collect the data from. Selected participants were five teachers who were purposively selected from the Business Education Department in two secondary schools, four from Sabata Senior School and one of the teachers was from Tobee Junior Secondary School. The participants provided rich and detailed information and taught business education subjects which are Commerce, Accounts and Office Procedures. Participants were asked to check the transcribed notes from audio recordings and chats so as to make corrections if there was a need.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Teacher's collaboration and students' improved learning outcomes**

The findings of this study show that if PLCs are implemented in schools, there is a possibility of a positive impact on the students' learning outcomes since teaching is also likely to be effective. Participants indicated that PLCs meetings could have an impact on student learning as teachers, with the help of school heads would be encouraged to work together, share experiences, and innovative ways which they could use to motivate students to learn. The participants noted that if PLCs were promoted and encouraged in schools, therefore, learning outcomes could improve since students would enjoy the lessons because the teachers would be active, creative through interacting with the students during lessons. For example, one teacher, Ms. Koketso, commented that during PLCs: "Teachers will work together to identify low performing students and come up with solutions to help students such as giving them remedial lessons and other forms of assistance."

Similarly, Mr. Setso noted:

"Collaboration encourages teachers to work together as a united team, a practice that can eventually aid in developing effective techniques which could be useful in student learning. I think teacher collaboration is the best practice in improving student learning because teachers will work together to improve teaching and motivate students to learn and appreciate the education. Teamwork among teachers is a great tool for improving students' academic performance, since teachers will be working together, sharing of ideas and assisting each other in areas where others are lacking".

#### **Teacher's skills gained during PLCs meetings**

The participants indicated that through PLC meetings, teachers interact with each other and advise each other on what can be done to improve pedagogy and students' learning. Mr. Setso stated that: "There are many skills that teachers will learn by participating in PLCs meetings, such as creativity in teaching, good listening, good communication and being good role models. PLCs can definitely assist in developing self-confidence and motivation amongst teachers."

Ms. Thompson stated that:

"PLCs are important because teachers communicate with each other and share opinions about their classroom practices. When teachers communicate with each other about their strengths and weaknesses during the meetings, they could improve since they would learn from others and by so doing correct themselves. For example, at such meetings, a teacher can learn how to optimally engage students in a lesson, a skill they may not presently possess."

When teachers frequently meet for professional learning activities, they are capable of inspiring one another. Through participation in PLC meetings, teachers gain skills which they could use to enhance their classroom practice.

Ms. Koketso said that:

"PLC meetings will result in an improved approach of teaching in the sense that teachers will share their different approaches during the meetings and come up with more effective approaches that will make teaching and learning more enjoyable. If lessons are enjoyable, they will yield expected results which will surely improve the academic performance of students."

Since PLCs will be a new initiative in schools, some of the teachers may be hesitant to attend the meetings, which they may deem insignificant due to a lack of knowledge on how the communities work. As a result, some may not even attend meetings because of their negative attitude toward trying new things.

Ms. Kolozi commented that:

"Some teachers may not like the innovation and are hesitant to participate in the meetings hence a challenge. Most teachers lack the skill of collaboration, and some prefer working alone. Initially, this is going to be a major challenge when implementing the PLCs as the teachers will have to be motivated first and initiated into learning to work with others. To them, it will be a new culture."

Participants noted that during the meetings, teachers and other participants could encourage each other to work hard to ensure that the students learning outcomes are improved. Ms. Koketso noted that: "This is because teachers can work together to change the way they teach and engage students, which will lead to students to achieve greater results." When PLCs are properly implemented in schools, there is a great possibility of a positive change in students' learning outcomes, especially if students are adequately supported and encouraged by their teachers. Mr. Gabo commented:

"PLCs enable teachers to ensure that students take their schoolwork seriously, like when working on their assignments, as well as submitting their homework in time. If students can do this, they will always be motivated to do their schoolwork without being forced by their teachers and this will improve their academic performance."

#### **Resources and time constraints**

In most schools, you might find out that there is a shortage of facilities in which teachers can use to carry out such meetings. Some of the buildings such as the school halls are used by students as their classrooms due to inadequate space. Ms. Koketso pointed this out as a challenge of implementing PLCs in schools.

"Lack of facilities used for carrying out the PLC meetings may hinder the progress of the meetings. Time too can be a major issue when trying to schedule meetings for the teachers to attend. This is because some teachers might be held up at lessons; some will be attending some long-scheduled meetings. So, the issue of different working schedules will pop up and time is going to be a major source of conflict."

Ms. Bimbo added that: "Different teaching schedules is going to be a problem as it may be a problem to come up with the suitable time for the meeting to be held due to the different teaching schedules."

Mr. Gabo commented that:

"In the first days of execution, it is going to affect the students positively because teachers will be interested and curious wanting to be part of the meetings and as such they will deliver content effectively to the students because they will be motivated."

Similarly, Ms. Koketso stated that:

"Implementation of PLCs will affect students learning differently. For example, some may positively respond to the development by using it to enhance their learning. Students' performance will improve due to changes brought about by PLCs. For example, truant students may start to attend lessons regularly. Students will start enjoying their lessons and will always be alert and not to sleep in class. They will be active during lessons asking questions and also answering questions asked by the teacher."

Ms. Thompson also noted that initially, PLC meetings might face challenges:

“Some teachers may respond negatively to its implementation due to lack of understanding about how it works. Some may be hesitant to try out the new practices that are suggested, thinking that such changes may negatively impact on their teaching and their students may not perform to the best of their ability.”

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that through the implementation of PLCs in school, there is a likelihood of improved learning outcomes amongst students due to collaborative efforts amongst teachers in lesson preparations and classroom instruction. During the PLC meetings, teachers can empower each other by advising one another to work hard and ensure that students' interests are prioritised. Through such meetings, teachers can learn how to better approach lessons by embracing students with various abilities. Also, the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in schools can be challenging as most teachers will have to adjust to the “new normal” of attending meetings to learn from each other in readiness to prepare for lessons.

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## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors equally contributed to the success of the article.

## CONFLICT

No conflict of interest was experienced.

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