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Some aspects of school seen as a Professional Learning Community

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Abstract: *Each school is part of the community and at the same time, a provider of education services. This makes school a Learning Community for both teachers and students. While in the case of students this is a mission accomplished, in that of teachers' things seem to be a bit more difficult. The latter ones should see themselves as members of a Professional Learning Community (PLC), where each teacher should cooperate with the other to achieve common goals, engage in common research activities for the progress of their school, take part in evaluating school results and propose plans to improve them etc. This research aimed to identify teachers' perception of the role of school as a Professional Learning Community, to identify how school boards support and encourage this idea through participative management and to identify lines of joint research in which teachers are involved. The instrument used was a questionnaire having 30 close-ended items, administered to pre-university teachers from Bihor county, Romania. The implementation period was January to June 2016. The results show that there is collaboration between the same subject area teachers, who form committees to discuss, analyse and propose solutions. The research has also showed that more effort is required to improve collaboration between more experienced teachers and those who are at the beginning of their career, to improve collaboration between different subject area teachers by getting them to engage in joint projects, but above all, there is a need for a greater involvement of teachers, of school boards in managing schools so that participative management is achieved.*

Keywords: participative management, Professional Learning Community, schools

Introduction

In recent years there has been a considerable interest in *Professional Learning Communities* (PLCs), that is, the communities formed by the teachers employed by schools. The concept of PLC has been much discussed in the literature in the area (Dufour, 2004; Hord, 1997, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Wood, 2007; Jerome, 2009; Harris & Jones, 2010, etc.), and the definitions given point to many of its characteristics. The researchers agree that the definition of PLC should take into account the concepts it consists of: community, professionalism, learning. Thus, PLC in a school means the continued cooperation, based on reflective practices, of the teaching staff, supported by the school board, with the aim to improve students' learning performances and increase the prestige of the school by promoting shared values, by collective creativity and by effective teaching practices which lead to better school outcomes. Some remarks must be made. In order to be a true PLC, teachers should focus on the continuing improvement of their performances, on continuing professional development, which should be achieved mainly as job-embedded learning. They should cooperate permanently in planning, analysing and implementing teaching activities, as well as on their critical evaluation, share experiences, hold discussions and reflect upon problems and solutions, promote new models of thinking and acting. This implies more than discussion meetings. Action and research plans are required, based on a clear and strong vision about what the organisation should become, with the aim of helping all students to learn. It is also of utmost importance that the teachers of the school embrace the idea of continuous learning process. The most important characteristic of a productive PLC is probably the readiness of those involved to accept feedback and work on improving their activity (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This fact assumes respect for and trust in colleagues, a solid knowledge of the subject area, appropriate competences which enable an effective teaching that focuses on learning, as well as a school board that is willing to support the vision and the objectives set forth to improve school activity.

In brief, some attributes of PLC would be: focus on common actions, beliefs and behaviour, commitment for continuing improvement and development, team effort, but with each member being responsible, the shared conviction that teachers' activity is essential for improving students' learning, develop strategies which draw on strengths with a view to improve learning, continued evaluation of what has been effective and of what has been not, taking part in the institution's decision making process.

Problem of research

There are countries in which the education system has capitalised on PLC in school for a long time (USA, Great Britain, Australia, and in Europe too). Studies show that much effort has been invested over a long period of time and not only school staff have been involved, but also parents and the local communities (Kruse, 2010; Dufour, 2004; Cormier & Olivier, 2009;

Martin-Kniep, 2004; Garmston & Wellman, 1999). Thus, PLCs can be found at school, county/district or national levels. Regardless of how they are organised, they must include people who share the following beliefs and behaviour: *"caring deeply about learning; feeling free to take risks; challenging each other and raising the expectations of everyone; respecting and valuing perspectives other than their own by seeking and valuing every member's input; intentional in seeking to do the work better; aggressive in continually building capacity of each member to work smarter"* (Martin-Kniep, 2004).

In the context of Romanian schools, PLCs are in an incipient stage and much effort is required to make them truly effective. The difficulties arise from the context the Romanian school is currently in: a long period in which decisions were made and approved by a centre of power (ministry, county school inspectorate) was followed by the delegation of responsibilities to local levels. On the one hand, the structures had to be adapted on the fly, some responsibilities were delegated, others not, on the other hand, it takes time to change people's mentalities, they are still learning to assume responsibilities and to become aware of the role of each individual's effort (Bradea, 2013).

There are, however, even though only at a theoretical level in most cases, PLCs for teachers of certain subject areas, communities that can be organised both at school and local or even country level. In the Romanian education system, every few months, teachers can take part in meetings held at municipal, county or national level, where they can express their points of view, share experiences on a topic decided beforehand. Due to the compulsory aspect of these meetings and to the topics established by others, not all teachers perceive them as opportunities to learn something new. These meetings are characterised mainly by analysis and discussions, without clear, applicable outcomes, which are more or less used by teachers in the classroom activities. There are also examples, mainly in the academic world, of teachers from different cities/areas who share ideas, experiences and chat using the internet. The existing e-learning platforms make possible video and audio communication, where interaction is also present. However, in these cases too the interaction is limited to discussions.

A PLC implies more than just a meeting of a group of teachers who come together to discuss, analyse and debate. A PLC should offer teachers the opportunity of continually learning from each other, while also developing common action plans (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). And these action plans should start at school level. It has been proven that it takes a long time to form a PLC. Three to six years are needed to fully incorporate it in the everyday practices of a school. This is not possible without the support of the decision-making body (director, deputy directors, heads of departments). The existence of such a PLC depends on the organisational culture of that institution.

This research aims to present, using an empirical approach, some positive, encouraging aspects, but also some realities that should be improved in order to see the Romanian school as a possible PLC.

Methodology of research

Based on the ideas presented above, the specific objectives of the research were the following: (1) to identify to what extent teachers are familiar with the concept of PLC, (2) to identify the teachers' opinion about whether the schools they teach in have PLC strategies of their own (3) to identify the teachers' perception of school leadership, which is a key factor in achieving an effective PLC.

The sample of research consisted of 186 people (N=186), all pre-university teachers from schools in Bihor county, Romania. The people of the sample were chosen using the simple random sampling procedure.

The main research method used was a questionnaire based interview, and the corresponding instrument consisted of 30 multiple choice questions. The questionnaire was prepared by educationalists from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research of Oradea University and each respondent filled in its printed version. The implementation period was January to June 2016.

Results of research

The quantitative interpretation of the results was performed by calculating the statistical frequency of the answers provided by the respondents. The results are presented below.

Figure 1. To what extent are teachers familiar with the concept of *Professional Learning Community*?
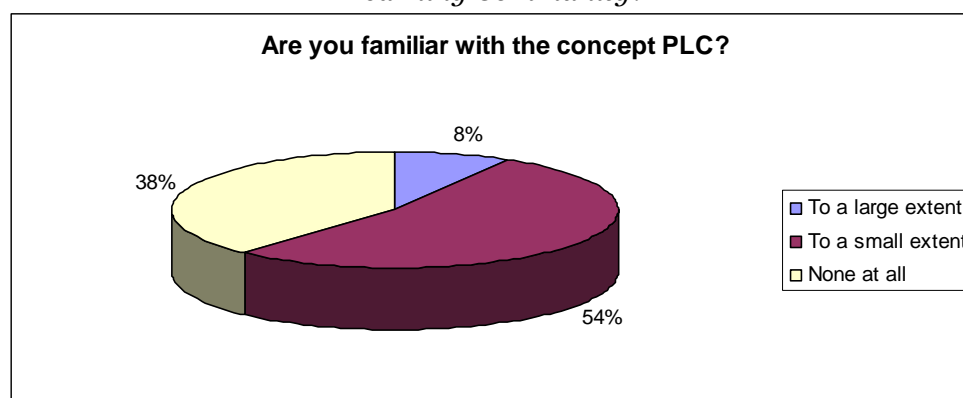
The fact that 8% of the respondents are familiar with the concept of PLC and 38% do not know anything about it shows that most school are not truly concerned to develop a PLC. It is hard to believe that even though the teachers do not know the concept of PLC, or know little about it, it is possible that a school's staff of teachers functions as a PLC. The analysis of the answers given to the indicators in Table 1 invalidates this hypothesis.

Table 1. Teachers' cooperation in schools

| Indicators	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you happen to debate in breaks topics related to your subject area or topics related to teaching?	0	0	90	48.3	69	37.3	21	11.2	6	3.2
Do you cooperate effectively within your department to help students achieve the best results?	66	35.4	71	38.2	40	21.5	7	3.8	2	1.1
Are the successes of teachers presented during meetings of the Board of Education?	18	9.6	60	32.2	69	37.3	36	19.3	3	1.6
Are you interested to learn from your colleagues as much as possible about their professional activity?	60	32.2	79	42.4	35	18.8	12	6.4	0	0
Do you accept a point of view/opinion about your activity from a younger colleague?	99	53.3	61	32.8	26	13.9	0	0	0	0
Do more experienced teachers offer support to their younger colleagues and to beginning teachers?	13	6.9	58	31.2	105	56.5	7	3.8	3	1.6

Looking at Table 1 it can be seen that there is cooperation between the teachers, at least at lip service level. Even though the breaks could be good opportunities to discuss informally and openly relevant aspect of the teaching activity, some of the respondents, 6%, do not seize this opportunity. On the other hand, not all teachers can use breaks for this purpose. The respondents who belong to this category (never) are those who teach technical subjects or subjects related to science (Biology, Chemistry, Physics) and who usually need the breaks to prepare the teaching aids for their next lesson and for this reason, they stay in the laboratories, far from their colleagues.

There is, however, cooperation at the level of departments (set up for each subject area). The regular meetings of these departments are effective, which is shown by the percentages of the answers: 35.4% (always), 38.2 (often) and 21.5% (sometimes). While in smaller groups, that is, within departments, different aspects of the teaching activity are discussed, analysed, debated and evaluated, when all the teachers of a school come together at meetings of the Board of Education, things do not always happen in the same way. At such meetings, the topics most often discussed include statistical data about the students' results, administrative aspects, requests coming from higher levels (county school inspectorate, ministry), while successes achieved by some teachers are rarely shared with the others. The answers which fall in the 37.3% (sometimes) and 32.3% (often) categories refer to presenting activities carried out within country or international level education project in which

the school, through some of its teachers, is involved. It is not much, but it is a beginning.

As it has been stated above, one of the conditions of an effective PLC is the teachers' permanent desire for professional development, for learning, for sharing expertise, but also their openness to constructive feedback. The answers show that most of the teachers are interest to learn from their colleagues as much as possible about new aspects of their professional activity. Most of them claim that they accept a younger colleague's point of view (53.3% - always, 32.8% - often), but the answers given to the last indicator call into question the validity of these answers. Thus, regarding the cooperation between more experienced teachers and the younger ones, who should be supported by the former, the percentage of that being always done is very low: 6.9%. The highest percentage is for the answer 'sometimes', 56.5%. In Romania mentoring and tutoring are still in an initial stage.

Figure 2. The predominant leadership type in school
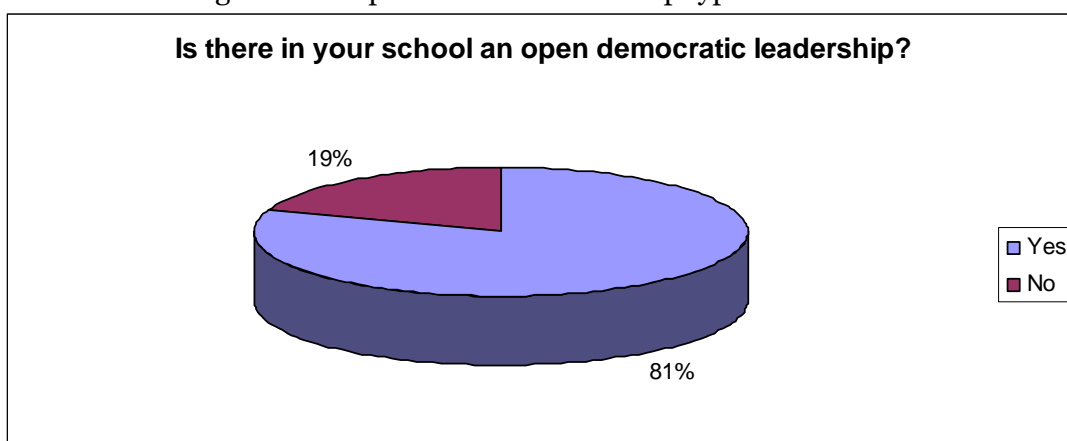
The existence of a cooperation culture is an essential condition of PLCs, but its implementation depends to a great existent on the board of the school. Figure 2 shows which is the predominant culture in schools from the teachers' point of view. The predominant percentage is that of an open leadership (81%). All those who belong to the 19%, that is, those who claim that they do not benefit from an open leadership, work in urban areas, where the staff of schools is larger, there are more students, and the problems faced are manifold. Maybe in these schools cooperation and the headmaster's involvement in the teachers' true problems is harder to achieve. The different aspects of leadership are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Supportive and shared leadership

Indicators	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Does the school headmaster cooperate with you?	87	46.9	60	32.2	21	11.2	15	8.1	3	1.6
Are you involved in the school leadership and decision making process?	6	3.2	11	5.9	17	9.2	108	58.1	44	23.6
Does the board of the school encourage teachers to be creative and innovative?	21	11.2	114	61.3	43	23.2	8	4.3	0	0
Do you, along with your colleagues, feel that you are involved in the implementation of the school's operational plan?	20	10.8	88	47.3	68	36.5	10	5.4	0	0

Looking at Table 2 it can be seen that there is a difference between the teachers' perception regarding the existence of an open vision (which involves teachers in the school leadership and decision making process) and the actual reality in schools. For the first indicator, which shows the cooperation between school headmasters and teachers, the highest percentages were reached by the always, 46.9%, and often, 32.2%, answers. It is also good news that 61.3% of the respondents claim that they feel encouraged by the school board to be creative and innovative.

However, when we look at the teachers' actual involvement in the school leadership and participation in decision making, things are different. In Romanian schools, the executive power lies in the hands of the Management Board. Out of the school employees, those who belong to this body are some teachers chosen by the entire staff, the deputy headmasters, and the headmaster of the institution. Thus, the small shares of positive answers when the involvement in the school leadership and decision making is discussed (3.2% - always, 5.9% - often, 9.2% - sometimes) come mainly from those teachers who belong to Management Boards or are head of departments. The answers with high percentages (58.1% - rarely, 23.6 – never) reflect a reality of the Romanian school: as long as many decisions are made at national level (ministry), it is very hard for the school board to promote a culture of cooperation. Being aware of these aspects, the teachers do not have expectations, they are pleased if the headmaster cooperates with them from time to time, they feel encouraged, and do not feel a desire to get involved in decision making. 47.3% of the respondents claim that they feel often involved (but then again, through decisions made by the board) in the implementation of the school's operational plan. This explains the difference between what is perceived by many teachers as an open democratic, leadership, and a reality, which is not always like that.

Conclusions

The research shows that significant further effort is required to reach the point when the Romanian school is seen as a PLC. It is hard to organise and maintain the cooperation efforts at institution level, but in line with the PLC model, it is compulsory that the small groups which already exist in the Romanian schools integrate in the large group of the institution (Norwood, 2007), group which commits itself to creating a common vision, that of a team, in which teachers and headmasters work together to achieve the objectives of the organisation.

Unfortunately, in the Romanian education there are some barriers which prevent the development of PLCs. One of them is the subject areas, as some of them tend to naturally benefit from priority over others, which is an aspect present in other countries as well (Riley & Stoll, 2004). Thus, the teachers who do not teach the subjects which are included in the national evaluation (Romanian language, Mathematics or subjects related to the students' specialisation area) feel marginalised in their schools, and their results are less visible. As a result, they feel neither appreciated nor involved in the role of the school. But, in our opinion, the most important obstacle in creating and developing PLC in the Romanian schools is the way the evaluation of teachers is performed. The evaluation criteria take into account only the individual results, and, based on these evaluations, when staff reductions are made, those teachers who have lower scores are chosen. Thus, it is hard to encourage cooperation when each teacher wants to acquire a higher score than the other, to hide from other colleagues their participation in activities, to stand out with their achievements at school or county/national level. For this reason, major changes are required at the level of the entire education system. It is known that the professional learning which takes place within a PLC should receive support from politics and the government, from the curriculum and training, as well as the human resources. Unfortunately, the Romanian legislation on school education, from 1998, has been amended several times. PLC should be a bridge which transforms learning from macro-knowledge level into micro level, by developing the teachers' professional abilities, which will eventually materialise in practices and subtleties needed to be used in the school or in the classroom. When professional learning takes place within a system ruled by shared expectations and objectives, by professionalism and responsibility, the result is a deep change for the individuals, but also for the entire education system.

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