CHALLENGES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

The objective of this systematic review was to determine the implications of Professional Learning Communities as an improvement strategy in educational institutions and how organizational structure, leadership, collaborative work and reflection of teaching practice, and shared mission and values have influenced the development of Professional Learning Communities. The development of this review article followed the methodology established in the PRISMA Statement, the scientific information was retrieved mainly from Scopus, EBSCO, PROQUEST, Scielo, Springer and Google Scholar with a range from 2017 to 2020. The time assumed to perform the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion process was developed in two months. Of the 91 researches that resulted from the specialized search performed, 15 were finally included. To establish the inclusion criteria, research articles, systematic reviews and case studies were determined; peer-reviewed, relating organizational structure, leadership, collaborative work and reflection of teaching practice; and mission and values shared with professional learning communities. The exclusion criteria considered in the systematic review were those investigations that did not demonstrate a relationship or interrelation between the variables mentioned; either at the level of title, abstract, objectives and those with methodological deficiencies. The results indicate that the organizational structure, leadership, collaborative work and reflection of teaching practice; and the shared mission and values are determinants for the consolidation of Professional Learning Communities as a strategy that establishes actions for institutional improvement.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, leadership, collaborative work, shared mission, teacher reflection, organizational strategies.

Introduction

The Professional Learning Communities constitute a space where teachers, from a common vision, share experiences, dialogue and reflect critically, exercising an autonomous leadership based on collaborative work roles, encouraging inquiry on pedagogical practice, in organizational conditions that facilitate the internal processes of the school, where the family spirit is lived, joining efforts with innovation and research proposals to provide quality education.

In current times, there are problematic situations that are evident in schools, obstacles and barriers that do not allow adequate organizational learning, which makes it difficult for teachers to learn from their experiences and are not able to manage knowledge; therefore, students are harmed.

The objective of this review article is to determine the implications of Professional Learning Communities as a strategy for improvement in educational institutions and how organizational structure, leadership, collaborative work and reflection of teaching practice, and shared mission and values are related to the development of Professional Learning Communities.

From this, a proposal arises to transform schools into organizations that learn and where the formation of professional learning communities is a strategy to guarantee professional development linked to the development of student learning; prioritizing collaborative work and identifying successful pedagogical experiences that allow to generate institutional improvement, accompanied by pedagogical leadership and a directive management that allows to provide quality service to students. Therefore, it will be a challenge to prove that Professional Learning Communities are a strategy for improvement in educational institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The review of the articles foreseen in the present research was carried out according to the 27-item checklist and the flowchart foreseen was the PRISMA statement. The information was collected in various search engines such as Scopus, EBSCO, PROQUEST, Scielo, Springer and Google Scholar; MENDELEY was used as a manager of bibliographic references and publications, a system that allowed storing and organizing documents.

The period of completion of the systematic review was from November 14, 2020 to January 15, 2021; this period of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion lasted 2 months.

The main search criteria were "Professional Learning Communities", "Collegial Teaching Work", "Professional Learning Communities" "Leadership and Professional Communities" among others. The search yielded a total of 91 documents that were processed according to the methodology mentioned above, being selected 15 researches in total for the final review. The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed research

articles, systematic reviews and case studies that address the relationship between professional learning communities with organizational structure, leadership, collaborative work and reflection of teaching practice; and shared mission and values.

The exclusion criteria considered in the systematic review were those investigations that did not demonstrate a relationship or interrelation between the variables mentioned; either at the level of title, abstract, objectives and those with methodological deficiencies. Likewise, the empirical articles were evaluated using the study quality assessment tools proposed by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.
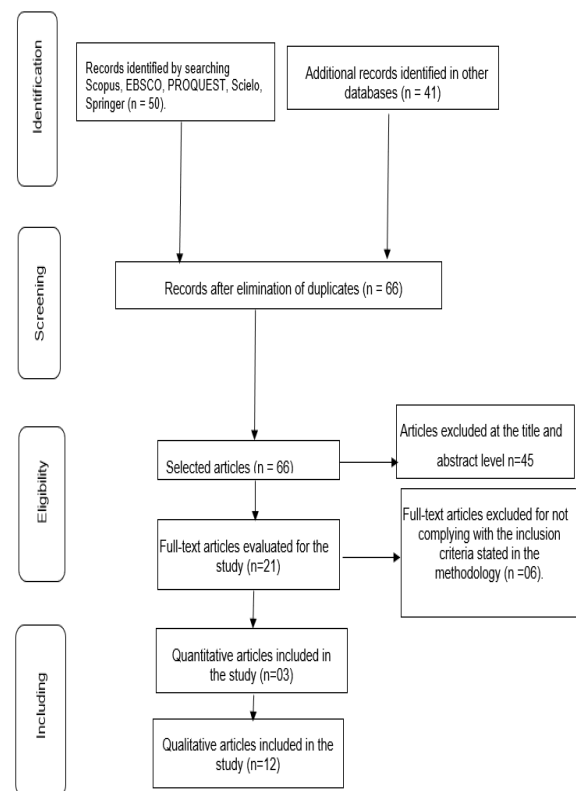

Figure 1. PRISMA model analysis unit selection flowchart. (Reynosa et al., 2020)

Table 1 Research included in the systematic review.

No	Authors/Year/Title/Published	Comunidades Profesionales de Aprendizaje				Comunidades profesionales de aprendizaje	
		Organizational structure	Leadership	Collaborative work: Reflection on teaching practice	Mission and shared values	Type of study	Instrument, technique or method
1	Buitrago, M., & Suárez, M. (2019).			X		Qualitative	Critical social approach and research acción educativa.
2	Cantero, N., Antonio, R., & Vallejo, P. (2018).		X			Qualitative	Grounded Theory Personal interviews to Directors
3	Flores-Fahara, M., Bailey-Moreno, J., & Torres-Arcadia, C. C. (2019).	X			X	Qualitative	Naturalistic observations Interviews
4	García-Martínez, I., Higueras-Rodríguez, L., & Martínez-Valdivia, E. (2018).		X			Qualitative	Systematic review .
5	García Manuel Prieto-Méndez Eds, J. E. (2020).			X		Qualitative	Structured questionnaire
6	Guerra, P., Rodriguez, M., & Zañartu, C. (2020).				X	Qualitative	Comprehensive descriptive
7	Hernández, M. E. M., Rincón-Gallardo, S., Kenigs, O. A. A., & Bravo, C. P. V. (2020).		X	X		Qualitative	Multiple cases. Likert questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.
8	Leclerc, M., & Moreau, A. C. (2012).			X	X	Qualitative	Documentary analysis

#	Author					Approach	Instruments
9	Molina, C. A., & López, F. S. (2018).	X			X	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews
10	Molina, C. A., & López, F. S. (2019).		X	X		Qualitative	Case Studies Interviews
11	Morales-Inga, S., & Morales-Tristán, O. (2020).	X	X		X	Qualitative	Ethnographic observation. Semi-structured interviews
12	Morales, S., & Morales, O. (2019).	X	X		X	Qualitative	Bibliographic analysis
13	Retamal, John; Bermúdez, Saúl; Rodríguez, M. (2019).			X		Qualitative	Socio-critical approach and educational action research
14	Vaillant, D. (2019).	X		X		Qualitative	Qualitative Questionnaire
15	Zúñiga González, M. G. (2020).			X		Qualitative	Ethnography Conversations Semi-structured interviews Questionnaires

Table 1 shows the distribution of the general results of the search. 33.33% of the studies respond to the subcategory organizational structure (5 of the 5 studies demonstrate interrelation with the other subcategories). 40% respond to the leadership subcategory (4 out of 6 studies show interrelationship with the other subcategories). 53.33% respond to the subcategory collaborative work: reflection of teaching practice (4 of the 8 studies show interrelation with the other subcategories). 40% to the subcategory mission and shared values (5 of the 6 studies interrelated with the other subcategories). Twenty percent of the studies included were quantitative in approach, while 80% corresponded to the qualitative approach.

Upon analyzing the results, it was found that organizational structure, leadership, collaborative work: reflection on teaching practice, and shared mission and values were central and determining subcategories in the constitution of Professional Learning Communities. In order to develop a focused discussion consistent with the objective of this research, these subcategories are discussed below.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In relation to the organizational structure and its relationship with the formation of professional learning communities (PLCs), it has been shown that the purpose of these is to optimize educational performance, and in this, the organizational structure is fundamental, since the PLCs need flexible structures capable of allowing feedback between their various levels; otherwise, a rigid organizational structure could impede their optimal performance; however, in many places, public education does not duly recognize the importance of this component (Morales-Inga & Morales-Tristán, 2020). It is of vital importance that educational institutions establish forms of organization that make possible the development of the PLCs, showing flexibility in their structure and at the same time making viable meeting spaces between teaching and management peers to establish the operational bases of the PLCs. Gradually, public schools are recognizing the importance and the need for organizational structures that encourage dialogue and pedagogical reflection.

Following this perspective, the implementation of PLCs requires structures and decisions that make collegial meetings between teachers possible, being a fundamental aspect of change in the educational institution (Molina & López, 2018); conditions that the pedagogical leader of the school must guarantee; analyzing and understanding the context to make the implementation of professional learning communities feasible in a consensual way, which allows promoting educational innovation in the face of the changes that are evident in society, always seeking to improve the learning of students, facts that allow providing a quality educational service.

A study based on the results of a survey of managers in Latin American countries that participated in the PISA test in 2015, revealed that there is a lack of organization of teachers with flexible schedules, also, there is a low budget for teacher training and education, all of which makes collaborative work and thus the analysis of pedagogical practice impossible. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink and propose other ways of collegial work (Vaillant, 2019);

Thus, managers must include in their management actions, the organized, consensual and structured promotion of collaborative actions and for this, they must guarantee time, as well as pedagogical and financial resources, counseling, evaluation and recognition, with pedagogical leadership that guides, excites and motivates teachers towards collaboration and peer-to-peer exchange. In this context, the PLCs require forms of organization in which the members of the educational community participate in a critical reflective dialogue that allows for reflection on teaching practice with commitments to improvement, in order to improve the educational service focused on student learning (Morales & Morales, 2019).

This type of organization is a fundamental aspect to consolidate the CPAs, in order to promote a collegiate pedagogical reflection in relation to the pedagogical challenges evidenced in the schools, which should be aimed at the achievement of student learning, therefore, the management teams must ensure organizational and structural conditions that demonstrate strategies for obtaining good results; because the PLCs work on a basis of organizational learning, that is, collective learning that has an impact on the organization (Flores-Fahara et al., 2019).

Regarding leadership and its relationship with professional learning communities, research shows that in order to strengthen the leadership capacity of teachers, it is necessary that the manager delegates and distributes responsibilities to the staff, engages them in school decisions and in the proposal of common projects to achieve the institutional objectives set; it is recognized that professional development of teachers is key to establish mechanisms for continuous improvement in the school, relating it to the exercise of managerial and teaching leadership that lead to collaborative practices, as a process of institutional learning (García-Martínez et al., 2018).

A study of 34 schools in Andalusia-Spain revealed that there are many difficulties in getting all members of the educational community to participate in the project of professional learning communities; therefore, it

is important that the directors of all educational institutions are able to enhance the qualities of teachers to generate a commitment of the whole community. In this context, PLCs become a space to exercise distributed leadership, valuing the importance and the need to promote it, engaging the whole community in its development and to achieve the objectives set for the school. This is a great challenge because the management must face the need of consolidating the PLCs, starting from a diagnosis where existing problems are determined and solutions are proposed to be assumed as improvement actions, with a prospecting approach, where management actions become the change engine and make the participation of the whole community feasible, exercising a participative and democratic leadership (Cantero et al., 2018).

In the same line, a study revealed that, when accompanying 139 principals of La Araucanía in Chile, in the exercise of their management skills, leadership actions and the assumption of the learning culture in their schools, showed that the principals increase their valuation regarding the PLCs in which they reflect on their leadership practices and the way they learn in collaborative groups, generating a transformation in their schools. For this reason, it is important to promote the work of the PLCs, strengthening pedagogical leadership, developing their skills as principals and reorienting their leadership actions to improve student learning, as well as optimizing the teaching practice in each of their schools, all of which positively favors the valuation of these spaces (Hernández et al., 2020)

Leadership is a substantial dimension in the consolidation of professional learning communities, since they make directive management viable, promoting teacher participation as agents of change and transformation of schools. Many studies corroborate the improvement of student learning when teachers are formed in PLCs where pedagogical practice is shared and reflected upon, exercising shared leadership. In this regard, Morales-Inga and Morales-Tristán (2020) consider it important to distribute leadership through management committees in

which teachers are responsible for the management of educational institutions, without neglecting the possibility of implementing similar instances.

In relation to collaborative work and reflection of teaching practice, and their relationship with the CPAs, studies show that there is a relationship between them, because the latter are generated spaces that consolidate the aforementioned dimensions, prioritizing the reflection of pedagogical work in schools; a research conducted at Escuela Normal N° 3 in Mexico, identified the need for collaborative work to improve the academic results of students and thus strengthen institutional improvement actions. The research conducted at Escuela Normal N° 3, Mexico, identified the need for collaborative work to improve students' academic results and thus strengthen institutional improvement actions. It is very important to recognize collegial work, or collegiality, as a great strength that should be used to transform towards quality academic achievement and learning results, raising teachers' awareness and training in collegiality, because it requires investing efforts to lead to greater achievements (Zúñiga González, 2020).

In addition to this, the research analyzed allows validating the importance of collaborative work as a strategy that generates learning among teachers that will dynamize the pedagogical work, strengthening and ensuring democratic spaces for personal and community growth, in order to improve the development of learning sessions; and in turn, it generates the transforming commitment of teachers based on the changes that are evident in society. In the aforementioned study, the PLCs were structured and strengthened around collaborative work, corroborating, among teachers, that the strategy made sense and was useful in teaching practice, valuing the development of their social skills, as well as the reinforcement of each of the academic areas, all of which allowed replicating it in the classroom and converting this space into a scenario of continuous research (Buitrago & Suárez, 2019). Another fundamental aspect that results from collaborative work is that it allows the manager to organize the knowledge that enables the teams of teachers to collectively

create new knowledge and put it at the service of the educational community to achieve the planned objectives; hence, it is stated that in the educational field, knowledge management plays a very important role to achieve quality education (García Manuel Prieto-Méndez Eds, 2020). This fact is reaffirmed again when it is pointed out that collaborative learning allows the development of improvement proposals based on new knowledge, that is, a strengthened knowledge management; the teachers fulfilled the stages of the proposed model in a natural way, by learning, sharing, using knowledge, and disseminating it, both for the individual benefit of their own practice and also for the school organization in academic terms (Flores-Fahara et al., 2019)

However, faced with the need to consolidate collaborative work among teachers, many schools offer few or almost no opportunities for teachers to share their pedagogical experiences with their peers; many times, principals, based on the "compliance" of class hours, leave aside such an important strategy to improve student learning, without prioritizing the formation of PLCs. It is important to point out that the PLCs are characterized by generating collaborative learning, generating motivation among teachers by improving their pedagogical strategies; allowing for better teaching performance. School principals are the ones who make possible the professional growth of teachers and the consolidation of the PLCs; making organizational structures that favor collaborative learning among education professionals viable (Vaillant, 2019). It is necessary to implement actions to consolidate teamwork in the PLCs, since it is a strategy that allows the consolidation of relationships among peers to achieve the school's objectives. It is a privileged space to consolidate collaborative learning and strengthen pedagogical knowledge, as long as teachers consolidate bonds of harmony, equality and trust in a context that constantly challenges them (Hernández et al., 2020).

Likewise, collaborative work in the PLCs allows teachers to analyze their pedagogical practice, evaluating strengths and weaknesses, which allows them to offer suggestions, translated into proposals, that substantially contribute to the achievement of the goals established in the institution. Likewise, the discussion among peers and collegial reflection allows taking on new challenges that make possible their execution and subsequent evaluation for decision making. The PLC, as an improvement strategy, allows the qualification of the teaching practice, leaving the pedagogical task in the center, understanding its complexity and the possibilities of reflecting on the educational practice. An analysis of the daily classroom practice will identify its roots from a critical view and the continuous improvement of its being and doing (Retamal, John; Bermúdez, Saúl; Rodríguez, 2019). To this end, the manager, within the functions that correspond to him/her, must guarantee, by means of an adequate organization, the physical, operational and emotional conditions so that within the PLCs the reflection of the teaching practice is achieved as part of the collaborative work, because it is necessary to create spaces, within the educational institution, that allow collaborative work, group reflection and analysis of the teaching practice to optimize results in the schools (Molina & López, 2019)

Relating the mission and shared values with professional learning communities, the research revealed that every educational institution must develop a shared vision, a common thought for the benefit of the school. This vision must be known, internalized and assumed by the educational community, which allows the fulfillment of the strategic objectives set at the pedagogical and institutional level. It is essential to define the PLC as a school community that allows teachers to develop professionally, with a democratic leadership capable of learning collaboratively, with a shared vision and with institutional values that strengthen bonds of trust, commitment and solidarity. to build and manage knowledge that favors students in the achievement of their learning, all of which contributes in a significant way to the institutional life (Morales & Morales, 2019).

In this context, organizational values come to be the fundamental principles of human behavior. Values allow to form, in a concrete way, people who live together within the institution. Thus, they are essential for the consolidation of the

PLCs. Therefore, by promoting solidarity, tolerance, trust, responsibility and respect, they allow to establish links between the members of the school, contributing to obtain favorable results. Therefore, by promoting solidarity, tolerance, trust, responsibility and respect, which allow the establishment of bonds among school members, contributing to obtain favorable results and guaranteeing a harmonious coexistence and a good institutional climate. For the above mentioned, trust in the teaching team and in the tasks they perform should be emphasized, since it fosters a horizontal and close relationship, allows friendly and tolerant relationships where the sense of community makes professional, personal and community growth viable, promotes responsibility, solidarity and the experience of the family spirit (Guerra et al., 2020)

The exercise of values allows consolidating a special way of acting, thinking and feeling, of living together and making others feel the essence of the school's formative proposal. It is the "spirit" that runs throughout the institution, based on concrete ways of living. In the PLCs, it allows consolidating the school's coexistence, when it is stated that institutional values have many advantages, including the development of solidarity among colleagues and the dissemination of knowledge that nurtures a collaborative culture focused on the success of all students (Leclerc & Moreau, 2012); These values exposed as a way of life generate an institutional and, at the same time, individual commitment, overcomes the barriers of individualism to focus on the community and the achievement of common goals. It is essential to share values (emphasizing vision and individual commitment) in schools, not only informally, but also formally, through regulations (Morales-Inga & Morales-Tristán, 2020). Finally, it is a permanent task of school administrators to continuously review the effects of the PLCs as a strategy that consolidates a formative proposal based on institutional values, as well as to measure and evaluate the institutional climate in order to take actions to strengthen a democratic and participatory institutional life, listening and interpreting the needs of teachers according to the signs of the times (Molina & López, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

Educational institutions are currently challenged by the need to optimize their internal processes to improve student learning. One improvement strategy is the formation of PLCs, a space for professional growth and development where collaborative work allows for reflection on the pedagogical practice of teachers and at the same time establishes improvement actions that enable continuous research and better knowledge management to optimize the results of student learning.

Decisions in the school go through a leadership process, exercised by the principal, which in turn empowers and empowers teachers, so that, committed to their mission, they can make the best decisions, propose innovations and achieve institutional objectives within the PLCs that promote the participation of teachers as agents of change.

In addition, to build a PLC, it is necessary for the pedagogical leader to generate organizational structures, flexible in time and space, that generate a meeting between teachers and managers to promote dialogue and pedagogical reflection, with an adequate distribution of time, pedagogical and financial resources and even recognitions that motivate the teaching community to establish mechanisms for institutional improvement.

Finally, a PLA can only achieve its objectives within the educational institution when teachers know, internalize and assume the same mission, shared by all; where the implementation of institutional values allow the development of ethical and responsible professionalism of teachers, establishing bonds of trust, respect, solidarity and tolerance. Only in this way can a community based on family spirit be formed.

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