Professional Learning Communities' Effectiveness in Teachers: Exploring the Language Use

Anele Gobodwana[1], Thanduxolo Rubela[2]

Abstract

Teachers from the same local district engage in discussions about the subjects they teach. In manoeuvring, the best pedagogical approaches are employed, and as they meet, they use the language in those discussions. Department of Basic Education (DBE) has implemented PLCs, which have enhanced the effectiveness and relevance of teaching, aligning with the overarching goal of achieving educational success. This article aims to investigate whether language serves as an obstacle to discussions among multiple teachers. The emphasis on addressing the language issue is driven by the presence of multilingual teachers within a single classroom and shared meetings. This article draws on qualitative secondary data, utilizing document analysis as the primary method of data collection and analysis. A potential insight from this article is that language may indeed pose a barrier to academic interactions and discussions among teachers throughout the district. Finally, the practice of translanguaging should be embraced and valued in multilingual discussions.

Keywords: *Professional Learning Community, Department of Basic Education, Language Barrier, Curriculum, Teacher Collaboration, Multilingualism in Education.*

Introduction

In 2011, the Minister of the Department of Basic Education, along with the Minister of Higher Education and Training, established an Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED). This multifaceted strategy was designed to enhance progress and tackle the challenges associated with improving teacher quality. Given the historical context of the country's educational system during the period of oppression, this initiative has proven effective in fostering collaboration across districts. Firstly, the South African education system post-apartheid was transitioning into a new operational framework, aimed at enhancing the pedagogical system and providing better support for teachers. This strategy sought to foster collaboration, support, and engagement regarding curriculum issues and student outcomes. Furthermore, the Professional Learning Communities emerged from the educational reform, with the goal of equalizing education across districts and regions, particularly for educators in core subjects.

The subsequent definitions are in accordance with the DBE guidelines for educational institutions in South Africa. As noted by Reichstetter (n.d.), a professional learning community consists of educators, whether from primary or secondary schools, specifically subject teachers, who convene regularly and partially to enhance their ability to meet the needs of learners through a collectively shared vision focused on the curriculum. In continuation of the discourse on the effective functioning of professional learning communities, Eaker and Gonzales (2006) contend that it is essential for the school leader to offer support and establish the necessary structural conditions that enable collaboration between school leadership and teachers in the decision-making process aimed at improving teaching practices and fostering positive outcomes for learners.

In further discussion, the professional learning community collaborates collectively (Dufour, 2004) to address school challenges and makes joint decisions regarding essential learning outcomes (Hord, 1997; Langston, 2006). They both question and reflect on the lessons and instructional practices developed by the PLC team (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hall, 2007). The literature suggests that effective professional learning communities cultivate a collaborative culture among educators (Shellard, 2002), emphasizing a

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[1] UNISA, Email: aneleandza@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6579-7044

[2] DBE, Email: rubelat@hotmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9368-4186

shared responsibility (Haar, 2003). This focus on learning occurs through phase and/or subject team meetings, which analyse and influence teaching practices to enhance both individual and collective outcomes for learners (Peel, 2006). Teacher learning is characterized by engagement in a community of practice, where participation signifies a broader process of being active contributors to the practices of social communities and shaping identities in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998). Although this literature emphasizes the importance of having adequately qualified teachers, it does not provide any indication of the applicability of these findings to the South African school context.

Furthermore, DuFour (2004) discusses the Professional Learning Community (PLC) and asserts that this model has now arrived at a pivotal moment, one that is familiar to those who have observed the outcomes of other well-meaning educational reform initiatives. In this recurrent cycle, initial excitement transitions into uncertainty regarding the core principles underpinning the initiative, which is subsequently followed by unavoidable challenges in implementation, leading to the realization that the reform has not achieved the anticipated outcomes, the eventual discontinuation of the reform, and the initiation of a new quest for the next potentially successful initiative.

An essential part of continuing professional development for teachers in all fields, including the life sciences, is PLCs. Through collaborative discussions, shared investigations, and reflective practices, these communities aim to enhance teaching methods and learner performance. However, the language utilised in these interactions, both written and spoken, is an important but little-studied component of PLCs. When the language used in PLCs does not encourage critical thinking, profound educational discourse, or knowledge co-construction, its efficacy is frequently compromised.

The utilization of clear, comprehensible, and contextually appropriate language is essential for Professional Learning Communities (PLC), as this strategy fosters collaboration among educators within the same district. Considering that SA represents a diverse, multilingual, and multicultural community, it is noteworthy that even the teachers themselves are multilingual within a single district. This diversity presents challenges in communication, particularly when discussions among teachers may necessitate the use of a foreign language. Consequently, the objectives of this article focus on the linguistic issues that arise during strategic meetings of PLCs. We aim to address the following objectives:

- To explore the effects of language usage on the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities among educators.

- To analyse how the language employed within PLCs affects teacher engagement, knowledge exchange, and pedagogical advancement.

Ultimately, empirical research supports the assertion that the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be profoundly influenced by the language used in communication.

Horn and Little (2010) indicate that collaborative engagement, which is largely contingent upon the clarity of the language used in discussions, is a crucial characteristic of thriving professional communities. When the language is ambiguous, excessively technical, insufficiently scaffolded, or dominated by a select few voices, collaboration is likely to diminish. Similarly, Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) contend that the learning opportunities accessible to teachers are influenced by the conversational norms established within PLCs. Their research highlights the significance of equitable conversational practices that facilitate participation from all members, irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds or content knowledge.

Literature Review

In this section, we will examine pertinent literature that addresses the efficacy of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Prior to that, in a straightforward and accessible definition, this article presents that a professional learning community is among the educational centres, circuits endorsed by the Department of

Education to equip teachers with skills, instructional strategies, and solutions to the daily challenges they encounter in schools, particularly in the classroom (Rubela, 2018).

Language and PLCs

The use of language in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) pertains to the oral and written communication employed by educators to foster professional collaboration. This encompasses both colloquial language and specialized academic terminology. Educators may alternate between English and their native languages to enhance understanding, particularly in intricate subject areas. Language barriers frequently prevent some teachers from participating fully in PLCs, expressing their professional insights, and participating in collaborative discussions. This reduces the effectiveness of knowledge exchange and group decision-making. Furthermore, even in the absence of formal regulations within educational institutions that align with the Language-education policy, all schools possess informal or commonly accepted language guidelines, which are evident in the implicit practices of their teachers and administrators, as deduced from their interactions with students (Corson, 1993, p. 3). In discussing this reality, it is essential to note that the school, the district, and the province are governed by the PanSALB and the Constitution of South Africa of 1996, which mandates the use of local provincial languages in training sessions, meetings, and instructional practices.

In addition, according to the LieP, the democratic regime has attempted to address this situation by enacting linguistic policies that actively promote multilingualism and the teaching/learning of local African languages, in line with the overarching goals of nation-building, diversity, and tolerance (Department of Education (DoE), 1997).In the 16th century, immigrants and missionaries from Europe and America began to arrive in South Africa and other regions of the world, bringing with them Western educational concepts. Their advanced growth, strong religious convictions, and need for land and other resources all contributed to a widespread assumption that they were superior in terms of culture, knowledge, religion, and race (Jansen, 1990). From this vantage point, they justified seizing South Africa's resources and further imposing their culture, religion, and ideas on the indigenous people. Through this activity, the colonizers introduced the country to the value and presence of education (Gobodwana, 2023, p. 65).

Education is one of the most potent weapons for changing and improving society. Since it is

so powerful, there has frequently been debate over who should have authority over education

and the best ways to teach. Education has been used both to empower people and as a political tool to oppress them. Languages in education are thus vital in post-Apartheid South Africa. South Africa has garnered considerable attention from both the popular and intellectual spheres. Alexander (2000). South Africa recognized 121official languages after 1994, with 9 of them being African languages. However, having said that, there is still inequity within languages. English and Afrikaans are still considered the primary languages.

 Beukes (2009) contends that South Africa is caught between intention and performance, and that it is therefore necessary to thoroughly analyse and, most likely, rethink its current language policies and programs. In this regard, the researcher concurs with Beukes' (2009) view, as the country is often held under the shadow of behind-the-scenes officials who control our education system through the government's opaque manner. The use of AIL is heavily enforced in rural township areas of the nation, while pupils in contemporary CBDs and metropolitan areas are encouraged to study English or Afrikaans. Martin (1997) makes a noteworthy observation in one of his publications on Apartheid schooling.

One Central Scientific Discipline Serving as an Example

Life sciences involve teaching biological systems, structures, and scientific processes. This field demands both pedagogical expertise and mastery of scientific vocabulary. According to Motloung and Mavuru (2021), life sciences teachers often struggle with language when teaching complex scientific concepts in multilingual classrooms, which also impacts their communication within PLCs. Professional Learning

Communities are essential platforms for collective teacher learning. According to Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008), PLCs improve teacher effectiveness and student performance by fostering collaboration grounded in data analysis, instructional planning, and peer feedback. In the Life Sciences context, PLCs provide a critical space for teachers to collaboratively unpack complex biological content and co-construct effective teaching strategies.

Effective PLCs have been shown to support subject-specific pedagogical knowledge (Stark & Pringle, 2015). When teachers participate in PLCs that are focused on scientific teaching, they develop more confidence in inquiry-based methods and content delivery. However, the depth of such collaboration is heavily influenced by how language is used to build shared understanding and reflect on classroom experiences (Lomos, Hofman & Bosker, 2011). In multilingual settings, this may involve code-switching, translanguaging, or simplifying complex terms to support colleagues' comprehension (Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2021).

Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities in PLCs

The PLCs involve all stakeholders, including the senior managerial personnel. Teachers play a dual role in PLCs: as learners seeking support and as experts contributing to collective knowledge. Their responsibilities include sharing experiences, reflecting on practice, and actively engaging in problem-solving discussions. In Life Sciences PLCs, teachers are expected to unpack scientific language, discuss experimental teaching methods, and reflect on learner responses (Motloung & Mavuru, 2021).

Research shows that when teachers assume these roles seriously, their practice becomes more reflective and data-informed (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). However, their ability to fully participate often depends on their comfort with the language used in the discussion. In South African PLCs, teachers from rural areas sometimes rely on indigenous languages to express scientific ideas, which may or may not be accepted by colleagues depending on the group norms (Setati & Adler, 2000).

Language Equity in Multilingual Classrooms

Language equity in multilingual classrooms remains a critical issue in the education system, especially in SA, due to historically marginalised schools. A variety of home languages, such as isiXhosa, isiZulu, or Sesotho, are used by learners in schools for communication, while English or Afrikaans is typically used as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). This linguistic mismatch can hinder learner participation, comprehension, and achievement (Probyn, 2020). Addressing these barriers requires responsive pedagogical strategies that validate and integrate learners' linguistic backgrounds rather than ignoring them.

Historical Impact on Language Use in South Africa's Education

Gobodwana (2023:65) examines the historical context of the language utilized in South Africa, tracing its roots back to the early 16th century. This period marked the arrival of immigrants and missionaries from Europe and the Americas in South Africa and other parts of the globe, who brought with them Western educational paradigms. These missionaries not only fostered growth and held strong religious beliefs but also expressed a pressing need for land and additional resources. Such factors contributed to the prevailing notion of their cultural, intellectual, religious, and racial superiority (Jansen, 1990). From this perspective, they rationalized the appropriation of South Africa's resources while imposing their culture, religion, and ideologies upon the indigenous populations. Through these actions, the colonizers introduced the significance and existence of education to the nation.

Methods and Design

In this article, the authors have chosen to adopt this type of research. According to England (2021, p. 71), this type of research employs an array of qualitative methods to gather and analyze non-numerical data, such as words, images, and behaviors, aiming to generate in-depth and contextualized insights into the phenomena under study. In addition to the explanation of the methodology chosen for this study, Maurya

(2011, p. 295) further explains that the qualitative approach to research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand the concepts, opinions, and experiences related to the phenomenon. It can also be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for the research.

The primary method employed in this work is a combination of document analysis and critical discourse analysis, supplemented by field observations. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews will be conducted to get into the actual research. Desk research methodology is a method of collecting and analyzing information from available secondary sources, such as documents, reports, academic publications, and other materials available online or in libraries.

The purpose of desk research is to gain a broader perspective on the problem or issue under study, as well as to supplement or confirm knowledge on the topic. Desk research is particularly useful for studies on historical events or processes, as well as for theoretical studies. (Bryman & Bell, 2020,p.456). Further discussion to provide a description of the desktop (Saunders et.al., 2019, p.23). Desk research is a research method that involves using existing data. This technique will allow you to get the first idea of your market and users "from your desk." Secondary research encompasses previously published materials, including reports, articles, and similar documents. This method is much more cost-efficient than primary research and requires less time to conduct.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: The impact of language use on the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities among Teachers.

The current discussion arises from the linguistic choices made in regions where PLCs are present. This committee, which supports one another's advancements, is endorsed by the higher education framework in South Africa. Gobodwana (2023) asserts that South Africa is a multilingual nation, where societal multilingualism is prevalent. The post-Apartheid Constitution (RSA, 1996) acknowledges eleven official languages: nine African languages alongside the colonial languages Afrikaans and English, which were the two official languages prior to 1994. Nevertheless, despite English being the native language of fewer than 10% of the populace, these constitutional measures have failed to achieve their goal of enhancing and elevating the relative power and status of previously marginalized African languages; rather, English continues to prevail in the political economy (Statistics South Africa, 2012).

In this discourse, the language used in PLC should ideally align with the language of the respective province or district. Language serves as the most effective medium for interpersonal communication. In the Eastern Cape, it would be anticipated that training meetings would be conducted in the regional provincial language. The dominance of English has been shown to erode participants' confidence in their speaking abilities.

Furthermore, if the local language is not widely utilized, it has the potential to dissuade officials; this situation contrasts with the hierarchical nature of multilingualism, where languages, particularly those imposed during colonial times, are arranged in a hierarchy that mirrors political power dynamics, thereby either facilitating or restricting access to various forms of political, social, and economic influence. Individuals who perceive themselves as marginalized from power structures are acutely conscious of these dynamics, and educational institutions must provide students with access to these opportunities.

Theme 2: Language used within PLCs influences teacher participation, knowledge sharing, and pedagogical development

Regardless of the activities individuals engage in when they gather, be it playing, fighting, making love, or manufacturing automobiles, communication remains a constant. The environment we inhabit is fundamentally a linguistic one. We converse with friends, colleagues, cherished educators, family members, and others. The ability to use language, arguably more than any other characteristic, sets humans apart from animals (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2007, p. 3). Nelson Mandela famously stated that speaking a person's language earns their respect; conversely, failing to do so may result in being taken less seriously.

As societal practices evolve through historical progression, the cultural evolution of human behavior unfolds within the social context of human development. The concept of the past encompasses variations in societal methods and traditions, alongside the integration of culture into social processes (Gobodwana, 2026, p. 53). Engaging multilingual audiences in one's native languages enhances a speaker's confidence, enabling them to convey ideas more vividly and effortlessly to their listeners.

Conclusions

The discourse presented in this article corresponds with the advocacy of the country's constituents. Educators convene to exchange effective strategies and guidelines aimed at enhancing and refining the outcomes of the subjects they teach. In their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), it is essential for them to communicate in a language that resonates with the broader audience or participants. For instance, if all participants are Xhosa speakers, isiXhosa serves as the prevalent language and one in which they are proficient. Nevertheless, it is observed that these participants may converse in English, despite sharing a common Xhosa identity. For Indigenous populations, the agenda of the PLCs, which is articulated in English, does not fully represent Indigenous languages.

Consequently, this article promotes the incorporation of South African Indigenous Languages in meetings and brainstorming sessions. For example, Gobodwana (2023, p.75) notes that the recognition of 11 official languages, nine of which are African, has sparked a range of responses, from doubts regarding the practicality of maintaining 11 languages to scepticism that the underlying issue has been obscured: the belief that English ought to be the sole official language, similar to the situation in neighbouring Namibia.

This paper elucidates the language policy (Hooijer & Fourie, 2009), highlighting how the educational challenges posed by the South African Constitution and the Language in Education policy have transformed many previously monolingual classrooms into bilingual environments in South Africa. In these settings, educators are now tasked with teaching students whose first language differs from the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) used in schools. Should South African language policymakers fail to uphold the principle of language parity, the nation risks losing its status as a bilingual country. To this day, English and Afrikaans continue to be regarded as dominant languages and are often perceived as a more cost-effective and convenient means of communication.

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