

# Case Study: The Impact of the Professional Learning Community in Batinah South Governorate/Oman on Developing Students Reading Comprehension

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## Abstract

This case study examines the impact of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) on improving students' reading comprehension in the Batinah South Governorate, Oman. The study was implemented across five schools, where a dedicated team of senior supervisor, supervisors and senior teachers was established to conduct a comprehensive support plan. The study focused on enhancing the students' reading comprehension as a priority stemmed from the students' results of the previous semester. Reciprocal reading strategy was adopted and some follow-up sessions were arranged to monitor progress. Pre- and post-reading tests were analyzed in order to assess the effectiveness of the strategy. The findings of the study have revealed a slight but notable increase in students' reading comprehension levels, representing the potential of PLCs in fostering reading development within the school students.

**Keywords:** Professional Learning Community (PLC), Senior Teachers (SETs), Support Plan

## 1. Introduction

Professional Learning Community (PLC) as a model has been recently evolved in educational research and been under focus of literature. The concept of PLC means a community that would try to improve cooperative work cultures for teachers (Thompson, Gregg Niska, 2004). Teachers in the professional learning community form a team with shared beliefs about working together, exchanging ideas, reflecting, and attending to the requirements of their teaching and learning practices (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2008).

The community of this research has been grounded on five schools and led by the main team. This team consists of the senior supervisor, three supervisors and five senior teachers from five schools. The schools have been chosen because they all have shared similar features. For example, they are located nearby in the same willaya (state) which is Al-Musanaa wilaya. This made it possible for the senior teachers (SETs) to gather in one convenient school. They also share the same level of classes as they all include cycle two classes from 5 to 10. Also, all of these schools have SETs of the same qualifications and who graduated from the SQU (Sultan Qaboos University). Besides, these schools have got a complete staff of administrators who were ready to cooperate. They have provided their teachers with the needed facilities like photocopy machine, proximal and a smart board.

All the SETs are well experienced. One of the SETs has already joined the Specialized Center for the Professional Training of Teachers and has completed the 'Expert Teacher' program. This has affected the team positively as she has enriched her colleagues with the needed skills of data gathering and analysis and she has been much interested to work effectively in the team. All the SETs have IT skills and were able to work with data and graphs. They all showed willingness to work together in the community and have all shared the same target of improving teaching and learning process.

The team has focused on one developmental priority which is to enhance the students' performance in reading comprehension. This priority was stemmed from the results of the final exams of the previous year and which showed some general weak performance in the reading tasks among all the levels. Through the meeting which the SETs conducted with their 4 colleagues, the teachers admitted that they really needed support in the kind of teaching strategies that would work effectively with their students. Based on the class observations which we as supervisors had previously in many reading lessons, we did agree with the teachers that they needed some support in how to teach reading effectively. Moreover, there have been many Omani studies that have approved the existence of the problem in Oman. For example, Al-Yafae (in Borg, 2006) in his research of 'Syntactic knowledge in reading comprehension' and which was on grade 7 students, mentioned that although his students showed high levels of lexical knowledge, their reading comprehension skills were still low. Another study was the one of Al Humaidi (in Borg, 2009:156) who stated "I was motivated to do this study by the awareness of the difficulties that many of my learners have in reading English texts".

Recent reading research recommends that school teachers need to teach comprehension strategies at all grade levels from primary to secondary grades (e.g. Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008; Pearson, 1985). Students need strategies for clarifying new words and ideas that they meet while they read. They need guided instructions in asking comprehension questions and in making predictions. They need to be taught how to sort out main ideas and to summarize. Based on all these needs, research has highly recommended reciprocal teaching as an effective strategy that improves students' reading comprehension (Pearson, 1985; Pressley, 2002; Reutzel et al., 2005). Moreover, this strategy has been recommended for the team by one SET of the PLC as she experienced once the effective use of it. Reciprocal teaching is a discussion technique that is constructed on four strategies that good readers use to understand text: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). According to Reutzel; et.al. (2005) students who involve in reciprocal teaching not only improve in their reading level but also recall more of the material covered in the text.

Establishing the PLC was not an easy task especially at the beginning as we faced some challenges. One important challenge was time. The SETs were overloaded with many duties to cover in semester two. They have classes to teach, class visitations to cover, and administrative work at school to submit on time. Also, we, the supervisors, were overloaded as eleven schools were assigned to each one of us due to the shortage of five supervisors in the unit we work in. Therefore, some arrangements were done to overcome such struggles like moving some classes in the SETs' schedules, talking to the schools' administrators and setting a convenient plan agreed by all during the PLC's meetings.

## **2. Introducing and Instilling the Notion of PLC Work**

The notion of the professional learning community (PLC) was introduced to us for the first time during the training at the Specialized Center for the Professional Training of Teachers and the focus was on the importance of establishing a PLC in developing and enhancing the process of both teaching and learning.

It is based on the assumption that knowledge is placed in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysee, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003).

Therefore, I and the other supervisors started to introduce the idea of the community to the schools' administrations and teachers of our governorate. To instill the needed convictions regarding the importance of establishing a PLC, we followed some certain procedures. The first step was to organize an initial meeting with the schools' administrations during which we conveyed the target of establishing the PLC. Meetings are considered as a professional activity that allow members to involve with one another on numerous issues that increase teacher competence and develop students learning (Monroe-Bailargeon & Selma, 2010). Moreover, it is believed that the school principle is the main factor in the PLC process and growth within schools (Raywid, 1996). Hence, the schools' administrators were informed about the need of establishing a PLC, its importance in developing the teaching and learning process and what commitments they were expected to have throughout the PLC work. The next step was to persuade the teachers that there is a need to establish the community as they play a very important role in developing the learning process. For that, we conducted an initial meeting with the senior teachers during which we clarified the main target of the PLC establishment. During this initial meeting, we conducted an orientation workshop entitled 'Professional Learning Community' which focused on defining the concept of the PLC and shedding light on its efficiency in developing both the teachers' performance and the students' learning (Appendix 3). Workshops are regarded as an important tool that enables teachers to get better achievement and continue their professional growth. They also acknowledge teachers with ways of supporting their learners in a more effective way (Monte, 2013).

Furthermore, during the initial meeting the teachers were provided with some articles to get even more insights about the PLC. They were asked to conduct the same workshop at their schools with their colleagues. They had to convince their colleagues of the importance of building up a PLC and that the community would create chances for sharing thoughts and experiences with other teachers of the community. The senior teachers were also asked to record their colleagues' opinions and expectations regarding the notion of the PLC.

Such procedures have supported the process of introducing and instilling successfully the notion of the PLC. Both the administrators and teachers have shown willingness to help and support the establishment of the PLC.

The schools of the community have been chosen for many reasons as mentioned earlier. All the five schools are located in the same willaya (state) which is Al-Musana willaya. This has made it possible for the senior teachers to meet in one nearby school in order to share their successful achievement and to learn from each other. Also, those schools have been well known by their supportive administration staff. They also have many facilities like learning resource center, computer lab, smart boards and meeting halls. Besides, the SETs and teachers of these schools have been known as capable and qualified ones.

We do believe that in order to lead a new reform, we need to set a clear vision of how the whole process of change shall go on. Accordingly, communicating such vision clearly among all the members of the community, building up trust among them and empowering them to perform according to the vision would all ensure the successful implementation of the change. Kotter (1995), a professor at Harvard Business and World renowned change expert, in his book 'Leading Change' has mentioned eightstep change process. One of the steps he has mentioned is that making a successful change needs a clear understanding of what needs to change and why. The same point has been declared in the ADKAR Model (Awareness, Desire,

Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement) which clarifies that to start a change, a person needs to know what needs to change and why. This all indicates that without having this clear understanding of the importance of creating the change, then implementing it can end to be an unsuccessful experience for all the members of the PLC.

### **3. Establishing Professional Learning Community in the Batina South Governorate**

In order to establish a professional Learning Community and according to Coater model, a need to change the current practices needed to be recognized and felt as well. In order to achieve this, in the first meeting, the SETs were advised to analyze their students' results of semester one final exams. The next meeting, the SETs were ready to discuss the results and to convey their colleagues' opinion regarding their students' performance. Through many fruitful discussions, it was agreed that there was a great need to enhance our students' reading comprehension and that teachers' teaching strategies need to be developed. A certain reading strategy; 'Reciprocal Reading' was suggested by the SETs themselves as mentioned earlier.

The next step of establishing the community was to form a team alliance in every school of the community. Each team alliance consists of the school supervisor, the headmistress, the SET and an expert teacher who has been known as an active and a positive teacher. Those members have been chosen based on their recent appraisal reports and for their skills in leadership, influence and their ability to plan and organize. The purpose of this team was to lead the reform we as a community were expecting and looking for. In order to support the reform process and strategies, a clear vision needed to be set. The vision of our learning community as agreed in our second meeting was to enhance our students' reading comprehension by developing the teachers' teaching strategies. Our main team has delivered the vision clearly to every team alliance of the community and that was through mini meetings and discussions through 'What's up group' which has played a great role in overcoming the time shortage.

During our third meeting, the team, prepared a complete support plan to be followed by the whole community (Appendix1). Also, we, as a team, designed a follow up plan which aimed at clarifying how each procedure of the support plan would be implemented. The roles have been distributed among the members of both the main team and the team alliance in each school. The main team was responsible of planning, analyzing data, conducting workshops and demo lessons. They are also responsible of following the procedures and making sure that they are being implemented well throughout the whole community. The team alliance, as agreed, was responsible of implementing the planned procedures, observing colleagues in school, reflecting on each stage of the support plan and to share their feedback consistently through discussions held in 'what's up' group of the PLC and during the post lesson discussions. Such discussions have been very fruitful and have really supported the reliability of the PLC work by reflecting on teachers teaching performance and students learning and by sharing experience and knowledge among the teachers. Teachers through the social media discussions would pose questions and inquiries regarding any sudden drawbacks of the lesson and how would such cases be solved. Nevertheless, such discussions did give enough support and encouragement through working collaboratively, sharing materials among the schools, solving drawbacks and appraising the outstanding performance. All these factors helped pushing forward the consistency of the work.

It is believed that a goal without a plan is just a wish. Although our support plan started late (in March), our planning for the whole PLC work started much earlier in February when we held our first meeting. Our next meeting was during the second week of March and that was when we as a team suggested the developmental priority which the whole support plan was based on. It is clear in the support plan that the

sequence of the activities planned to achieve the target of developing the teachers teaching strategies has been logically set. For example, the first planned activity was conducting a pre-reading test which should be sequenced just before acknowledging the teachers with the new strategy. The next activity was conducting the workshop of the reciprocal reading strategy (Appendix 4) followed later by a demo lesson in order to clarify the strategy both in terms of concept and application. A post reading test was then submitted to students after the strategy was applied during a certain period of time.

In terms of flexibility, our support plan considered many aspects of the schools' work atmosphere and did provide enough flexibility as it is clear in the table of the support plan (Appendix1). For example, it is mentioned in the plan that the pre-tests could be given to students in different days in the schools of the community according to the teachers' convenient schedule. Moreover, what has been planned in terms of dates and timing in the support plan does not really match the date of accomplishment mentioned later in the follow up plan (Appendix2). This gives a clear indication of the flexibility our plan provided to the community members as it was difficult to assign a fixed date while sudden circumstances in any of the schools should be expected and considered. This also in return, affected positively the smooth going of the change process.

#### **4. Establishing and developing PLC and maintaining its continuity in the Batina South Governorate**

After specifying the developmental priority by the team and which was mainly based on the students' needs, designing a reliable support plan in order to create a clear picture of the PLC frame work was a necessity. The support plan was grounded on the purpose of enhancing teachers' strategies in teaching reading to the students of cycle two (5 to 10 graders) through the use of reciprocal reading strategy during the period of semester two (Appendix1). The support plan has included some certain procedures to be followed; for example, holding the initial meeting with the PLC team, preparing pre and post reading tests, delivering a workshop on the strategy in order to heighten the teachers' awareness of the strategy, and finally conducting a demo lesson to show the strategy in practice.

During the implementation process, we have inspected some initial achievements. For example, the teachers have shown great willingness in trying the new teaching strategy of the reciprocal reading. That was clear in the post lesson discussions during which the teachers were reflecting on each other performance. They discussed the drawbacks of their lessons and thought of alternatives. Moreover, the supervisors organized some school visits among the teachers. They also arranged some demo lessons to be conducted in the schools of the community to show better performance. This affected positively the teachers' performance which they showed later. For example, during one outstanding lesson at Shams AL-Huda school, the teacher asked the students, towards the end of the lesson, to do the task of 'walk gallery' where each group presented a poster and talked about it. Another example is what the teacher presented at Attika school by getting the girls to wear crowns on their heads with the name of each role written on them and she activated some technological ideas as well. Such outstanding performance was appraised and brought up during the discussion.

In terms of the challenges which we faced during the implementation of the PLC, time was considered as a serious challenge and the teachers' load was another one. Talbert (2010) mentioned that there are many challenges in PLC collaboration, like time management and insufficient teachers' experience. It was difficult to gather the senior teachers at the beginning because of their workload and time shortage at school. Also, the SETs revealed later in the next meetings that because of the workload at school, they



tried very hard to be committed to the PLC work and tried their best to submit work on time which really sometimes affected their duties as SETs. Besides, teachers of the community complained that they were tired and burdened with the extra classes which in return had a bad influence on their interest and enthusiasm of being engaged in the PLC work as it added extra demand. One clear example is Attika school teachers who showed less interest due to the work load they went through as their SET claimed. One more challenge was the lack of teaching knowledge in implementing the reciprocal reading in class which was faced by some teachers. For those particular teachers, post lesson discussions were perceived by them as underestimating their capabilities. This same matter has been mentioned by Talbert (2010) when he stated that implementing certain strategies could expose teachers' weaknesses to their peers and this threatened them. In response to such situations, the supervisors arranged further suitable training as an attempt to overcome such challenge.

In fact, regardless the above mentioned challenges, the team could cope with these challenges and could accomplish the planned procedures after introducing some serious changes. One of the challenges that we could overcome was the problem of timing. The team has managed to free the SETs once a week for the PLC work. In order to solve the problem of the inexperienced teachers and their lack of teaching knowledge, the team could conduct one more workshop for the teachers in which they were equipped with the needed materials and strategies. One more change that could affect the whole process positively was the creation of the 'what's up' group. Through this media, the teachers were able to pose questions and inquiries, to discuss ideas and to give useful feedback to one another.

Regardless the challenges faced by the PLC members, there have been some successful achievements which have been recognized and valued. Creating short wins, according to Kotter (1995), gives the alliance a sense of victory in the change process. Therefore, the main team of the PLC, as an example, supported one of the schools to host an English open day for their remarkable achievements in implementing the strategy. Many nearby schools attended in order to get an idea of the reciprocal reading strategy and how it could be implemented in class.

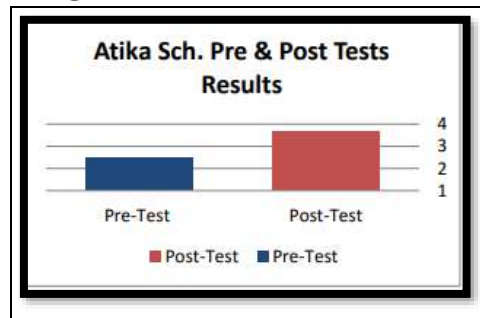
Nevertheless, teachers of the community received continuously the necessary feedback upon their performance both through the 'what's up' group and mini discussions. Furthermore, our regular meetings with the team have enriched the SETs with the updated issues. We used to discuss the agenda and prepare it through the 'what's up group' before the meeting. We also made sure at the end of each meeting that every SET got her electronic copy to be recorded in her portfolio.

## 5. Evaluation of Work within PLC

The secret behind the success of the PLC work regardless the short time of semester two was mainly the continuous revision of work and the continuous provision of feedback. The PLC members have received continuously feedback on their performance while applying the strategy and on their students' achievement through the short tests at the end of each lesson. Also, appraising the 'short wins' of the team has cooperated in pushing forward the work and in getting the members committed to the PLC work till the end.

The main team has evaluated the effect the PLC work has on the improvement of the students reading comprehension. Pre reading tests, before using the strategy, and post reading tests, after using the strategy have been given to students as a tool to assess the impact of the strategy on their reading comprehension. The following graphs show the results of both tests for each school.

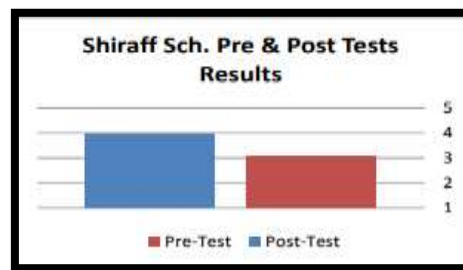
**Figure 1: Attika School Results**



N. of students	Total Score	Average Score of Pre-Test	Average Score of Post-Test
33	6	2.5	3.68

It is clear in the data above that the students got high average score in the post reading test. This class teacher used to supply her class with different materials like dictionaries and charts.

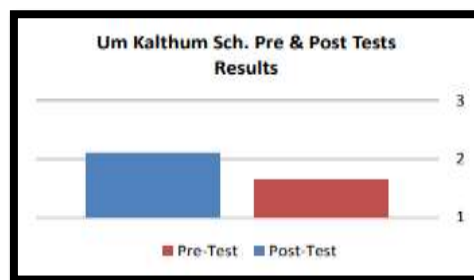
**Figure 2: Shiraff School Results**



N. of students	Total Score	Average Score of Pre-Test	Average Score of Post-Test
25	6	2.08	2.92

The data shows a minor increase in the students' average score. The teacher of this class has the least teaching experience in the PLC but yet has shown distinguished willingness to learn and to develop professionally. She has been engaged in different post lesson discussions (PLDs).

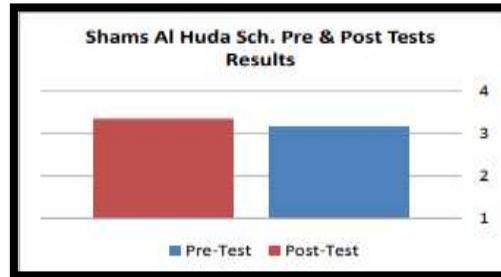
**Figure 3: Um Kalthum School Results**



N. of students	Total Score	Average Score of Pre-Test	Average Score of Post-Test
32	6	1.66	2.12

This also shows a minor increase. The teacher was visited in class many times. After the feedback sessions, the class changed from being teacher centered to students centered.

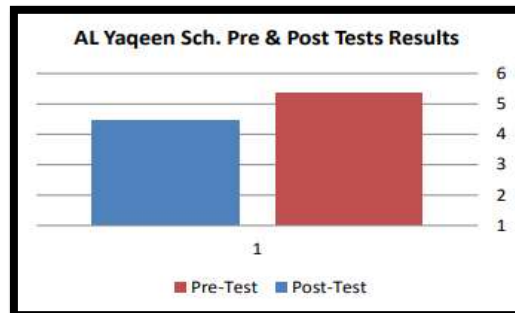
**Figure 4: Shams Al-Huda School Results**



N. of students	Total Score	Average Score of Pre-Test	Average Score of Post-Test
30	6	31.67	3.333

Although the teacher of this class has maintained good knowledge regarding teaching the strategy, the results were not up to our expectations as supervisors. The teacher used creative ideas in her class like the 'walk gallery' and others.

**Figure 5: Al Yaqeen School Results**



N. of students	Total Score	Average Score of Pre-Test	Average Score of Post-Test
26	6	5.34	4.46

This data shows dramatic decrease in the students' scores in the post- test. Though the class teacher is an outstanding teacher and this explains the high scores in the pretest, the low scores in the post-test can be attributed to many reasons. First, the strategy was applied in less than 12 lessons in this school. Second, the SET of this school did not attend regularly our meetings or the feedback sessions. So, we assume that the teacher did not receive enough guidance from her SET.

In general, the previous data shows, a slight increase in the average score of the post reading test in almost all the schools except for AL-Yaqeen school. However, this can still be an indicator of the positive impact of the PLC work on the students learning. This result supports the findings of many studies done on examining the relationship between teachers' participation in PLCs and student achievement and they all found that student learning improved. For instance, Berry et al. (2005) acknowledged the improvement of a rural elementary school over a four-year period. Phillips (2003) stated that the scores of underachieving students increased dramatically over a threeyear period. These, studies were conducted within a three to four-year period in order to get valid results regarding the impact of the PLC work on students' learning.



Therefore, this explains the slight increase we found in the results of our schools which came after a short time application of the PLC work.

The other tool of assessment is the teachers' questionnaire. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the responses of the teachers' questionnaire.

**Table1: Teachers' views on the Reciprocal Reading**

Questionnaires Findings/ Part One						
No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
1	'Reciprocal Reading' strategy helps me organize the steps of my reading lesson.	8	11	0	0	1
2	'Reciprocal Reading' strategy helps me manage my time in the lesson well.	5	11	2	0	1
3	'Reciprocal Reading' strategy affects badly the time planned for discussing the comprehension questions in class.	3	2	6	2	6
4	'Reciprocal Reading' roles (Predictor, Clarifier, Questioner and Summarizer) are difficult to be implemented according to the stages of the reading lesson.	1	5	3	3	8
5	'Reciprocal Reading' strategy helps assessing the achievement of the learning outcomes.	8	8	2	1	1
6	'Reciprocal Reading' strategy helps me design activities that suit each stage of the reading lesson.	5	13	1	0	1

**Table2: A summary of teachers' responses on the open question.**

Has your involvement in PLC influenced your professional development? How?	
Positive Impression	Negative Impression
1-Yes, I became more collaborative. 2-I benefited from my colleagues' feedback. 3-I learned how to work in groups focusing on one target. 4-Yes, it is helpful. 5-Yes, it saves time. 6-My classes are no more teacher-centered. 7-I learned to design different activities with colleagues. 8-Yes, it has given me chances to communicate and share thoughts.	1-It added extra load of work. 2- No. Caused us lack of time.

According to the previous data in both tables, it reveals that most of the teachers find the strategy and working within the PLC useful for their teaching performance and students' learning. This result is supported by some previous studies which found out that engaging teachers in PLC leads to changes in

teaching practice (e.g. Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000, Englert and Tarrant, 1995; Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004; Strahan 2003).

There was a kind of trust throughout our PLC work which helps its continuity. For example, the procedures stated in both the support and the follow up plans were systematic and moved the teachers smoothly from a step to another. Also, the teachers worked on the shared guiding norms and values which included cooperation, respect and integrity. Some teachers faced difficulty in applying the strategy with a class of low achievers, and some teachers were of less experience and might have lost the way at the beginning but because of their willingness and enthusiasm they continued the work. Therefore, and for all these reasons, the low increase in the students' result should be considered as a great achievement.

## 6. Conclusion

Working in the PLC and getting completely immersed in trying to achieve the target hand in hand with the team, I, myself, have been developed professionally. Hearing and reading about the PLC is not at all as applying it. Right from the beginning when we, I and the other supervisors, started meeting the school administrators and getting them convinced about establishing PLC, I discovered that we could do more. I gained many skills or I guess I did strengthen the hidden skills which without the PLC would not have been known. I could lead a group of teachers gathered in one place and could make them think and work for one target altogether, I could inspire teachers and could do the reflection process in a much better way; in groups; leading fruitful discussions instead of having a supervisor to teacher discussion which more likely teachers do not prefer. Eventually, I learned how to lead change.

Getting the teachers to be reflective practitioners is one great success that added a lot to my work as a supervisor. It is assumed, in research, that teachers' teaching knowledge is understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysee, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). Therefore, teachers were engaged in discussions and in many feedback sessions. They were also engaged in exchanging class visits with their colleagues.

The most remarkable success I have achieved throughout the work of PLC is getting the members of the PLC to work cooperatively. Cooperation is the most important thing that pushed the work forward. Without a cooperative team that followed the same procedures, moving on the same steps and stages, we would not have reached at a successful ending. Working in the PLC, allowed the teachers to collaborate in different ways like observing each other in class, reviewing lessons, videotaping, discussing teaching problems and investigating new ideas for teaching practice. A series of case studies done on PLCs (Berry et al., 2005; Phillips, 2003; Wood, 2003; Yendol-Silva, 2003) reported that successful cooperative efforts of teachers in the PLC included different ways of practice that encouraged sharing, reflecting, and taking the risks necessary to change. For example, Berry et al. (2005) clarified that the structure of the PLC helped teachers in a rural elementary school study their practice through such cooperative efforts like sharing lessons, using procedures for decision making, and taking notes to update colleagues about their work.

So, what motives did the members of our PLC have that pushed them to cooperate and work till the end? In fact, there was a focus from every single member of the PLC on developing our students learning and that is the key. This key also is the secret behind the continuity of our PLC. Many studies (Berry et al., 2005; Hollins et al., 2004; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003) acknowledged that the cooperative efforts of teachers were completely focused on meeting the learning needs of their students and this persistent feature facilitated success.

There have been times when we got hindered by some sudden obstacles, mentioned earlier, through the journey of the PLC. In fact, there are some factors which have not been taken into consideration through the work progress. Al-Yaqeen school as an example was not an active member. Based on the reasons explained earlier behind the dramatic decrease in the students' results, the PLC team should have included some crucial steps in the support plan. For example, the team alliance at each school was expected to do the needful follow up of the work, but yet the roles of each member, like the administrators and the expert teacher, have not been prescribed clearly in the support plan. Moreover, no regular written reports were required upon the progress of the PLC work from the team alliance in each school which has affected the final results as what happened at AL-Yaqeen school.

In order to enhance the work of the PLC in future, I recommend some suggestions as follows:

1. To expand the period of the PLC; from two to four years, in order to get valid results.
2. To establish PLC in schools and involve it in decision making.
3. To set sufficient time aside in teachers' schedules for PLC in order to enable teachers to work collaboratively.
4. To provide enough training for the school's administrators and teachers on the needed skills of the collaborative work.
5. To establish PLC in classes of the same level.
6. To appreciate the 'short wins' gained while working in the PLC to guarantee its continuity.
7. To provide chances for the professional development of the PLCs in school and to allocate time for it.

In conclusion, working in the PLC has enriched the team's both experience and knowledge. Teachers need to be engaged in a more collaborative work together in each school in order to improve the students' learning. They need to be engaged in fruitful group discussions for the sake of their professional development. PLC is a rich field that allows to be investigated on more in depth as it is of a great benefit for both teachers and students.

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