



Training Future School Leaders through Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract. The training of future school leaders is a major challenge for the current education system, given two important aspects:

1. social trends reshaping education systems, such as digitalization, inequality, demographic change, migration, and the aftereffects of the pandemic (OECD, 2025b); and
2. studies on the impact of principals on student outcomes and on school culture in general (Grissom, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Thus, the development of leadership competencies becomes a major responsibility not only of principal training systems, but also of school leaders themselves. This article investigates the way in which the development of professional learning communities for principals (school leaders) in education responds to the demands of preparing flexible, transformational, and sustainability-oriented leadership.

The research is based on the theoretical premises of professional learning communities (Stoll & all., 2006) and on modern theories of educational leadership (Bush, 2011; Senge, 2017; Fullan, 2001; 2005).

Purpose of the research was to analyze the need for professional learning communities for school leaders.

Participant was 25 persons holding leadership positions (principals and members of the school administration board) from various schools in Braşov (Central area), Romania.

Methods used: participative observation, interviews, and questionnaires, used within a mixed-methods research design.

The analysis of the data led us to the conclusion that, for the effective and sustainable training of educational leaders, professional communities learning is important because these communities enable, in an efficient, personalized, and solution-oriented way, the development of sustainable ways of thinking, acting, and feeling.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, School Leadership, Transformational Leadership.

1 Introduction

In the current social context, dominated by unprecedented labor market dynamics, the development of AI, and the shift toward sustainability, one of the major challenges for

education systems is the preparation of school leaders capable of inspiring others and bringing about lasting changes in school culture and student outcomes. A number of studies (Grissom, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004) highlight the important role of schools and leadership in developing a sustainability culture, in which collaboration at the macro level (school-community) and collaboration at the micro level (within the school, between leaders and teachers or among teachers) becomes an important source of learning and development, with a direct impact on student learning: “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al. 2004, p.5).

Other studies, show that there are six accelerators of change in education (school improvement), among which the first is vision and leadership, followed by coalitions for change, then delivery architecture, including school collaboration; data for collective accountability and improvement; teacher and school leadership effectiveness; and evidence-informed policy and learning (Ndaruhutse et al., 2019, p. 10).

Thus, we can observe that professional learning communities are becoming the main strategy for professional and personal development, with an impact on individuals, the organization, and the community.

Considering the OECD report (2025a) on the state of teaching in Romania, summarized in the TALIS 2024 report, we note that teacher collaboration is limited mainly to issues related to students and less to matters concerning professional development and opening the school to the community.

In Romania, the most frequent forms of collaboration among teachers include: engaging in discussions about the learning development of specific students (55%), working with other teachers in the school to ensure common standards in evaluations for assessing student progress (51%), and exchanging teaching materials with colleagues (29%). 94% of teachers “agree” or “strongly agree” that their principal has good professional relationships with staff (higher than the OECD average: 86%), 90% report that their principal provides useful feedback to teachers and staff (higher than the OECD average: 77%), and 95% agree that their school (higher than the OECD average: 92%). Principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers at their school, higher than the OECD average: 92%. (OECD 2025a, pp7-8)

Despite these results, the way in which principals manage to develop good relationships with staff is not examined. Who prepares them to be transformative leaders, as agents of change? Where do they learn to develop a culture of collaboration?

The present article aims to analyze the perceptions of school personnel with leadership and decision-making roles (principals and members of the school administration board) regarding the need for professional learning communities that can help them develop leadership competencies in a personalized and sustainable way. Through research conducted within a training course with principals and board of administration members, which functioned as a learning community, a number of formative effects of professional learning communities were identified, with both theoretical and practical implications for the training of future school leaders.

2 Literature review/ professional learning communities in the age of transformative society

Contemporary societies, shaped by diversity, rapid change, climate challenges, and digitalization, require transformational leaders who act responsibly, inspire others, and cultivate new leaders. Educational institutions are no exception.

The OECD's 2025a foresight report frames education as being transformed by broad social, technological, economic, environmental, and political forces, including inequality and AI-driven change.

Therefore, schools need, on the one hand, transformational leaders capable of systemic thinking and of finding innovative solutions to future problems, and on the other hand, they need professional learning communities that support efforts toward personal and organizational transformation.

The concept of the professional learning communities (PLC) has (re)emerged as an important topic in research within the current educational context, which is dominated by the need to focus on student learning outcomes, sustainability, and the school's openness to the community. The literature review highlights the idea that, although it is not a new concept because it has roots in the thinking of Dewey, Stenhouse, and Schön (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas, 2006), practice demonstrates positive effects on personal, institutional, and community development.

PLC is defined as, a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). The main characteristics of PLCs are: shared values and vision; collective responsibility; reflective professional inquiry; collaboration; group, as well as individual, learning is promoted.

Due to these characteristics, professional learning communities go beyond simple collaboration (professional discussion) among colleagues, because they call for or imply more complex processes of reflection, the sharing of values, and responsible involvement in decision-making. In education, professional learning communities are a useful tool for continuous professional development, effective both economically and professionally, and for sustainable development in general. There is research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of teachers' PLCs at the level of students and of the school organization: „An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning” (Bolam et al., 2005, p. 145)

Of course, despite the advantages described above, PLCs are not without certain limitations/difficulties. For example, classic studies on organizational change (Fullan, 2021) show how certain characteristics are lost when the group's composition changes or when there are deviations from the group's norms. Likewise, the natural stages that any group goes through—from the enthusiasm of formation to the process of group dissolution—cannot be ignored. It is well known that PLCs are fluid, rather than fixed, entities, perenially evolving with accumulating collective experience (Bolam et al., 2005).

A few questions remain open: How can we sustain these learning communities for as long as possible? What are the psychological and social mechanisms that contribute

to maintaining or revitalizing a professional community? How can we prevent the breakdown/"extinction" of a learning community? One possible answer lies in re-search (Fullan, 2005; Grissom 2021) highlighting the role of the principal and school leadership in creating and sustaining the "strong core" of the PLC.

In the development and support of authentic professional learning communities, an important role is played by school leadership and the principals. This idea is best highlighted by the phrase, „Principals really matter" Grissom (2021). Why is the principal so important? Arguments based on research on changes in education (Fullan, 2021; 2005; Senge, 1990) suggest that the principal is important both because of the legitimate attributes and roles that result from their status (encouraging collaboration, creating a culture of learning, etc.) and because of personal qualities such as emotional intelligence, trust, and leadership style.

M. Fullan (2001) emphasized the idea that the more complex society becomes, the more it requires increasingly sophisticated leadership competences.

It is no coincidence that the shift from transactional leadership to situational or transformational leadership reflects different social stages and needs. Transformational leadership, in its original sense as described by Burns (1978), has become of interest in the field of education against the backdrop of educational reforms and the search for solutions that would increase teachers' commitment at a high level.

Leithwood, in his research, identified six factors that make up transformational leadership: „building school vision and goals; providing intellectual stimulation; offering individualized support; symbolizing professional practices and values; demonstrating high performance expectations; and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions" (Leithwood, 2000, p.5)

He shows that this type of leadership is more than just caring for people or having a deep understanding of motivational mechanisms; rather, it stands out through the superior impact it has on the people in the school and in the community.

Therefore, investing in the training of principals appears to be one of the most effective measures, as Grissom shows in an extensive study dedicated to the impact of leadership. He shows that the dimensions in which the principal's impact is visible are: engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers; building a productive school climate, facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities; managing personnel and resources strategically. (Grissom, 2021, p.XV)

Leadership is therefore an important resource for PLCs, in terms of headteacher/principal commitment and shared leadership (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Bolam 2005). Smylie and Hart (1999) argue that school leadership must foster teacher learning by developing both human capital (individual skills and knowledge) and social capital (relational networks and trust) to drive meaningful school improvement.

Andy Hargreaves and Michael O'Connor (2018) explain that not all collaboration is equally effective. The most successful and sustainable efforts are characterized by both solidity and solidarity, meaning that they draw on both expert knowledge and strong collegial relationships, creating what the authors call collaborative professionalism.

Shulman (1997, p.101) argues that teacher learning's potential depends on:... the processes of activity, reflection, emotion and collaboration ... supported, legitimated,

and nurtured in a community or culture that values such experiences and creates many opportunities for them to occur and for these school leadership has a key role to play.

Many studies on transformational leadership emphasize the idea that the leader's personal qualities are the catalysts for change in the school. For example, the ability to motivate teachers, openness to dialogue, and the development and maintenance of trust have been frequently studied. Dialogue also appears to be a key link, being seen as the process through which the gap between individual and organisational learning is bridged (Senge, 1990)

The principal was the key person in developing relational trust, both in demonstrating it her- or himself, and in the way they fostered a culture where relationships were trusted (Byrk & Schneider, 2002)

If the relevance of transformational leadership no longer requires demonstration, having already been acknowledged through its impact on the entire school community, the issue of developing transformational leaders nevertheless remains open. In the context of contemporary society, a possible alternative is represented by professional learning communities for principals, focused on their training needs, reflection, and the exchange of experiences with individuals in similar situations.

All the research presented above becomes an argument for developing professional learning communities for school principals, so that they can subsequently acquire both the competencies and the psychological support needed to promote and foster a genuine culture of collaboration and professional development in their schools.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants and procedure

A total of 25 respondents participated in this study: 10 are principals and 15 are individuals with leadership responsibilities within the board of administration. The participants are from schools in Braşov County, selected randomly: 9 participants are from rural schools and 16 from urban schools. Twenty-three participants are female and 2 are male. One participant is serving their first term as principal and has up to 10 years of experience in education, while the remaining participants have more than 10 years of experience in the education system.

Data collection took place between October 2025 and February 2026.

The research used a mixed descriptive design, according to Patton (2002). According to constructivist-interpretivist perspective, we were interested to find out principals and school member board' perceptions of various aspects of their work in a natural context of teacher's training.

The research questions that guided the study were the following: What are Romanian member's school board and principals' perceptions regarding professional learning community need ?

3.2 Methods

In the our mixt research design, qualitative methods played an important role. One of the power explanatory methods was observation (a direct and participative observation). We opted for observation („the power of observation” Conger, 1998) as we thought this would best capture the complexity of interactions and actions of the participants.

The observation used an observation guide that aimed to record the following behaviors: involvement in dialogue, initiative in asking questions, willingness to share, and openness to collaboration. These behaviors were recorded during the leadership skills training course, carried out in a natural setting for the participants. The observer, who was also the trainer, was able to record, in addition to the behaviors included in the observation grid, other behaviors, reflections, and attitudes that emerged spontaneously during the training activities. We mention that the strategies used to conduct the course encouraged the expression of ideas, dialogue, and sharing. Interactive strategies were used, based on adult learning theories and adapted to the participants' psychological characteristics. Priority was given to methods based on group work, dialogue, reflection, and case studies.

Another „cornerstone method” (Conger, 1998) was the interview. The interview, conducted after the completion of the training course, aimed to capture participants' perceptions of the need for a learning community for principals (Do you think a professional learning community is useful for principals/board members? Why?); the advantages of PLC and dimensions of collaboration (Who do you share with / discuss the problems you encounter in your work as a manager / board member?)

To strengthen the qualitative findings, we also used a questionnaire that provided quantitative data regarding the usefulness of the course. The course satisfaction questionnaire, consisting of 20 items rated on a Likert-type scale, assessed participants' satisfaction with the content, methods, and quality of interactions.

4 Analysis/Results interpretation

Considering the research question regarding principals'/board members' perceptions of PLCs, the data collected through participant observation highlighted a willingness to share experiences from managerial practice, especially among more experienced principals. Engagement in dialogue, willingness to share, and collaboration with colleagues were much more frequent and consistent among principals and board members with longer tenure.

Their involvement stemmed from the experience they wanted to share, either for validation or to help train other colleagues. For example, the principal in the first year of the first mandate was frequently encouraged by the other colleagues and offered advice. In one of the training activities, for instance, participants were asked to provide advice to a principal at the beginning of his/her career. Most of the advice centered on the idea of collaboration, teamwork, and authentic communication with all members of the community. We present the advice of a school administration board member: „

Don't try to do everything on your own; work as part of a team. Listen more than you speak at first, and don't try to change everything all at once.”- A. D.

And a principal's advice: „Build his team; Set an example for everyone; Take management training courses; Find a balance between balcony and dance floor”. -P.T

It is noteworthy that almost all participants, regardless of their length of service, expressed the need to learn from the experiences of others. A principal with more than 25 years of experience in education and over 10 years as a principal stated: “I am still learning... I also learn from younger principal colleagues, especially in the areas of digital skills and relationship-building... The world today is different.”

The interview data provided important nuances to the observational data. Thus, the participants' responses regarding the usefulness of PLCs were coded and grouped into main themes and subthemes, according to Table 1.

Table 1. The perception of the need for PLC for principals.

Initial coding	Axial Coding	Selectiv coding
PLC is essential		
Checking the effectiveness of the proposed solutions	A. Validating	
Validating the solution	B. Collaboration	
Professional development		THE NEED FOR A PLC FOR PRINCIPALS
Support networking	C. Problem solving	
Learning by experience/practice	D. Professional development	
Developing leadership competences		

Based on the analysis of the codes, themes, and subthemes emerging from the processing of the responses, we can observe a real need among people in leadership positions (principals or board members) for the development of a professional learning community, especially because the group functions as a space for analyzing and solving concrete problems, thus promoting sustainable learning. This is also confirmed by the specialist literature, which shows that PLCs play an important role in developing what Hargreaves and Fink define as sustainable leadership: “Sustainable educational leaders promote and practice sustaining learning. Sustainable leaders sustain others as they pursue this cause together” (2006, p. 272).

Regarding forms of collaboration, the interview responses confirm what the TALIS report (OECD, 2025b) also highlighted concerning teacher collaboration: it is limited to collaboration with colleagues and very little with colleagues from other schools. Therefore, the development of PLCs for principals may be a resource for expanding collaboration among principals, between schools, and among teachers from different schools. This was highlighted by the fact that, during the training course, which functioned as a learning community, partnerships between schools were also initiated. We

can say that one of the positive effects of the training course was the partnership established between the two schools and the creation of a “Welcome Guide” for early-career teachers joining the school.

The questionnaire targeting participant satisfaction showed that all participants rated the quality of the course and the topics addressed as “very good” or “good.” The modules included in the course were rated differently by participants, as can be seen in the graph below (Fig.1):

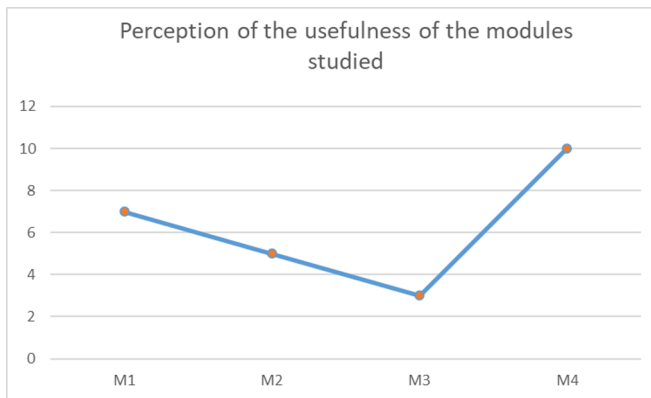


Fig. 1. Participants perceptions of the usefulness of training course

The most highly appreciated modules were those focused on Situational Leadership (M1) and Human Resource Management (M4), modules that primarily addressed issues related to the team and modern leadership theories and that allowed, to a great-er extent, sharing, dialogue, and reflection. The open-ended responses to the question regarding activities with formative effects indicate that case studies, exchange of experiences, and problem-solving were the most frequently mentioned by respondents.

This once again reflects the need for dialogue, for sharing experiences or even one’s own reflections with those in the same situation and demonstrates the importance of continuous professional development through collaboration, a point also found in the literature. A systematic review of the literature on sustained, collaborative continuing professional development (CPD) and its effect on teaching and learning (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell, & Evans, 2003) concluded that collaborative CPD could have a positive impact on teachers and pupils.

In summary, the data above underscore the formative role of PLCs in the development of both educational leaders and their schools. Likewise, the need for PLCs for principals becomes evident.

5 Conclusions

Starting from the research question related to the perception of school leaders’ need for PLCs, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data led us to the conclusion that there is a need for professional learning communities for decision-making personnel in

schools (principals and school board members). This need is supported not only by the perceived benefits of such learning communities—continuous professional development, collaboration, and the validation of solutions—but also by the concrete effects resulting from the establishment of these communities, namely the development of partnerships between schools, the creation of support networks for decision-makers, with effects on the school's organizational culture and, implicitly, on student outcomes.

Although this research also has the limitations inherent to a predominantly qualitative study, in which findings cannot be generalized, we can emphasize its practical importance, reflected in two directions: the formation and development of PLCs for school leaders, and the design of training programs centered on the needs of people in decision-making roles in schools, in an innovative and transformative way, adapted to the requirements of the school of the future.

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