



In the Crucible of a Professional Learning Community: Becoming a Highly Effective Teacher in Challenging Contexts

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Despite evidence for the established role of a professional learning community in supporting teacher professional learning and development, it is still among the most under-utilized resources available to teachers. The current study in a major educational institution in the Gulf sets an example for establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in unusually challenging academic contexts. These contexts often lack support from the administration for teacher professional learning and development, and there is minimal collaboration among colleagues. While synthesizing ideas from mainstream literature and social psychology, the study expands the conceptual base for establishing PLCs and offers a strategic vision for developing highly effective teachers through participation in a synergistic PLC. Following Interpretive Research Paradigm, the study employed ethnographic research methodology to understand how the participants in the study describe themselves and their actions as well as their interactions with others. Based on a thematic analysis conducted using NVivo software, the findings suggest that goal-oriented collaboration of teachers in a PLC, where empathy, maturity, and abundance mentality are practised, can prepare teachers for professional excellence, leading to significant improvements in student learning and achievement.

Keywords: ELT in the Gulf, professional learning community, student achievement, synergy, teacher professional development

INTRODUCTION

Interdependence is a higher value than independence.

– S. R. Covey, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

The teaching profession, specifically language teaching as a highly professional discipline (TESOL Inc., 2003), is not meant for meagrely motivated individuals unwilling to toil and sweat. Unlike Bernard Shaw's (1903, p. 334) satirical assertion, "He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches," Shulman (1986, p. 4) contended that the teaching profession is a right choice for only those "who understand" and teach. Keenly

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aware of the complex nature of the teaching profession, Leung (2009, p. 55) also argued that a teacher should possess “a high degree of professional consciousness that is informed by relevant specialist knowledge and explicit values.” Hence, considering the inevitable need for setting high standards for the teaching profession, a stricter process must be in place for the selection of aspirants to the field of education, with criteria considering personality attributes and motivation to become a teacher as well as in-depth knowledge of professional theory and pedagogical practices (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Shah, 2017). More importantly, once teachers become part of academia, it is crucial for academic institutions to take substantial steps to support their ongoing Professional Learning and Development¹ (hereafter **PLD**). This support should facilitate their transition from nascent, less experienced teachers to (highly) effective teachers. By investing in teacher PLD, institutions can undoubtedly enhance their students' learning and achievement, which primarily hinges upon teachers' professional competence (Metruk, 2021).

To manage and expand support for teacher PLD, a firm resolve is needed to continue extending our intellectual frontiers for a broader understanding of a fundamental *question* in educational research: How do teachers learn and develop effective teaching practices (Tatto et al., 2016; Webster-Wright, 2009)? Fortunately, some prominent researchers, in their efforts to inform this question, have furnished ample evidence highlighting the tremendous impact of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) on teachers' PLD and, thereby, on their academic and pedagogical practices (Campbell et al., 2018; Hodkinson et al., 2008; Wenger et al., 2002). To be specific, one systematic approach to developing less effective teachers into highly effective professionals is the formation of PLCs in educational institutions. A less effective teacher is a teacher who, for various reasons, is not achieving the desired outcomes in terms of student learning and achievement. This failure could be due to a lack of knowledge or skill in a particular subject area, ineffective teaching strategies, or a lack of motivation or dedication to the profession. It is important to note that the term “less effective teacher” is not intended to be pejorative but rather descriptive of a teacher who may require additional support and development to become more effective in their role.

In the academic context, a PLC can be defined as “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, operating as a collective enterprise” (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). Despite evidence for the established role of PLCs in supporting teacher PLD, it is unfortunate that “one of the most underused resources available to educators is the *community of colleagues* with whom they work” [emphasis added] (Caine & Caine, 2010, p. 1). Granted that no man is an island, the bane of the teaching profession is the isolated nature of teachers' professional lives and pedagogical practice, which Lortie (1975), in his seminal work, described as an egg-crate like structure that keeps teachers least aware of each other's professional lives and practices. Considering classrooms as their personal domains, teachers usually have limited interaction of any academic nature with their co-workers, keeping their professional lives and practices shrouded in privacy, which consequently leaves little scope for any fruitful, mutual exchange of professional ideas, resources, and strategies (DuFour, 2011).

The current qualitative study, conducted in a higher education institution in the Gulf, aimed to set an example for establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in unusually challenging academic contexts, where collaboration among colleagues and support from the administration for teacher PLD were negligible. While synthesizing ideas from mainstream literature on PLCs and social psychology, the study expands the conceptual base for establishing PLCs and offers a strategic vision for developing *highly effective* teachers through participation in a synergistic PLC.

The Research Context: Problematizing the Professional Learning Challenge

The current study site is the main campus of an English Language Institute (ELI) of a large public university in the Arabian Gulf. The English language program at the university was initially established around 40 years ago by the British Council. Since the introduction of the Foundation Year Program (FYP) in 2007–2008, the university has made it a prerequisite that all first-year students complete six credit units of general English before starting their desired course of studies in any department or college of the university. The ELI English language program, accredited by the renowned U.S. Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), has a large faculty of around 200 English language instructors from 25 countries. The program caters to the EFL needs of about 7000–8000 university students annually. The Foundation Year English Language Program is content-based with integrated skills, comprising four core language courses delivered through a system of 4 modules in one academic year. Each module lasts 7–8 weeks, with 18 contact hours per week. At the start of a module, each faculty member is provided with a detailed curriculum and course description with expected Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for the assigned courses.

Generally, in education systems in developing countries where the true significance of education is not fully appreciated, academic infrastructures offer limited support to teachers for collaboration or participation in any PLC for their PLD (Al-Mahdy & Sywelem, 2016). In a worst-case academic scenario, one might experience a total lack of concern for developing genuine collaboration among teachers and creating space for PLCs. Most educational institutions in our region have top-down administrative structures which, bent on preserving the status quo, mainly offer lip service to issues concerning teacher PLD. As evidence suggests that merely encouraging teachers to collaborate will not lead to any considerable educational change, institutions should embed professional collaboration in teachers' professional lives and work in the form of PLCs (DuFour, 2011), particularly in developing education systems.

On the research site, the professional environment is marred by the absence of a genuine professional learning community and the ubiquity of a mindset plagued by professional isolation and haunted by self-survival. According to Covey (1989), it is not unusual to encounter self-serving individuals who are quick to take advantage of others' knowledge and resources; however, it is hard to find synergistic souls who generously share their repertoire of rich pedagogical resources, allowing their colleagues to benefit from their professional accomplishments. Further promoting the notions of competition with a perceived lack of trust, the research site has a stringent teacher evaluation system, ranking teachers on a scale of 1 to 5. Rank 1 is the lowest, and teachers placed in lower

ranks (1 or 2) are terminated or transferred to rural satellite campuses. On the contrary, teachers at rank 4 or 5 become eligible for promotion and monetary gains. Pressured by such a competitive work environment, nobody ever considered establishing any PLC on the research site, consequently reducing *collaboration* among the faculty members to a sporadic, limited, and primarily unreciprocated activity. Among the challenges faced by teachers to become members of PLCs in the Malaysian context, Jafar et al. (2022) also underscore unfavourable teacher accountability systems and unsupportive administrators.

Like most traditional academic setups where leadership is a top-down process, the current context has never encouraged any plan or endeavour for establishing PLCs to facilitate teachers' phased transition to interdependent and *highly effective* teachers. Convinced that one "pathway to teacher leadership is self-initiative" (Smylie & Eckert, 2018, p. 556), we took the lead and established a *synergistic* PLC in this unusually challenging academic context. The PLC's primary objective was to promote teachers' collaboration for developing context-specific, high-quality teaching materials that could enhance teachers' instructional capacity and thus increase our students learning and achievement. Since research has already shown that in the success and sustenance of PLCs, lack of administrative support, in terms of convenient scheduling, availability of space, financial support, etc., can be an obstacle (Wells & Feun, 2007; Angelle & Teague, 2011), any attempt to set up a PLC on the research site was fraught with numerous challenges. However, we decided to embark on this venture and devised an elaborate plan with detailed guidelines for the functioning of our PLC. Despite the problems discussed above, the current research context presented an opportunity to establish a PLC to support our colleagues' PLD and thus endeavour to become *highly effective* teachers in our institution. This study aims to explore the potential of a synergistic PLC in addressing this goal through three research questions that guide our investigation.

Research Questions

1. How can we establish PLCs in challenging academic environments where administrative support for such endeavours is limited?
2. What are the key elements necessary for an effective PLC to promote genuine professional support and collaboration among colleagues?
3. How does teachers' participation in a synergetic PLC impact their professional learning and student achievement?

Literature Review

Situated Learning and Community of Practice Theory

According to Illeris (2007), the most significant breakthrough in sociocultural and historical tradition came about with Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) situated learning and community of practice (CoP) theory. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) conceived learning as situated in sociocultural contexts and communities of practice and enacted through participation in them. Repudiating the idea of learning as incrementally stored in mind, Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 35) emphasized that "learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable

process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world.” In other words, learning is the natural outcome of a social practice, which takes place in a deepening process of participation in a community of practice (Haneda, 2006). That participation leads to a kind of learning that is essentially continuous, relational, and socially constituted.

With a continuing process of evolution in the theory of situated learning and CoP, Wenger (1998), in a later work, described the learning experience as unique and comprehensive, comprising various sociocultural, contextual, and individual dimensions:

Our knowing – even of the most unexceptional kind – is always too big, too rich, too ancient, and too connected for us to be the source of it individually. At the same time, our knowing – even of the most elevated kind – is too engaged, too precise, too tailored, too active, and too experiential for it to be just of a generic size (p. 141).

There is increasing evidence that teachers learn in a variety of ways, and the process of teachers’ PLD is idiosyncratic and complex, rendering all attempts at the uniformity of the learning process problematic (Shah, 2016).

The Structure of a Community of Practice (CoP)

Wenger (1998, p. 5) argued that a social theory of learning must integrate **meaning** (learning as experiencing), **practice** (learning as doing), **community** (learning as belonging), and **identity** (learning as becoming) to account for learning as participation in a CoP. In this way, learning as participation results in a rich experience that affords us to develop meaning (meaningful skills and practices) through a mutual sharing of our social and cultural resources in a CoP; at the same time, our participation in a CoP is considered as worth-pursuing and enlightening. Wenger (1998) described all these components of learning as interconnected and viewed learning as experiencing a phenomenon, engaging in a practice, having a sense of belonging to the social/professional context, and a means of becoming a more competent professional and a better human being.

In addition to communities of practice being sites for the negotiation of learning and identity, members of a CoP engage in *practice*, which helps them develop relationships with other colleagues. For Wenger (1998), no matter what forms different communities of practice may take, they all share three fundamental characteristics of **mutual engagement** (discussion, sharing of perspectives and exchange of ideas), **joint enterprise** (common professional goals, interests or activities), and **shared repertoire** (artifacts, concepts, experiences, tools, etc.), which are crucial in order for *practice* to generate coherence in a CoP and distinguish it from other groups and communities (for details see pp. 72-84).

From Community of Practice (CoP) to Professional Learning Community (PLC)

The construct of CoP has been gradually developed and dilated by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002), which eventually

germinated the idea of communities of practice for enhancing professional learning and development. In their earliest work, Lave and Wenger (1991) postulated the concept of situated learning that focused on interactions between novices and experts, resulting in a professional identity for the fledglings. In his later work, Wenger (1998) extended the construct of CoP to offer personal growth and an individual's core vs. peripheral participation in a group. Later in 2002, Wenger et al. (2002) revisited their conception of CoP and started viewing it as a platform for improving organizations' effectiveness and competitiveness through the professional development of its employees. They redefined the concept of CoP as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Hence, one can see the widespread propagation of conscious efforts for establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in institutional settings for PLD (Li et al., 2009). Although both a CoP and a PLC are meant to support and enhance the learning process, a CoP is more informal, emphasizing voluntary membership and intrinsic motivation, with less clearly defined objectives for supporting collegial learning (Enthoven & de Bruijn, 2010). On the contrary, based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory, a PLC is more formal and institutionalized in its scope with well-defined aims to enhance teacher PLD through collaboration and enhance student learning and achievement (DuFour, 2004). Hence, we have chosen the term PLC for the current study instead of CoP.

Professional Learning Community as a PLD Model

Scope for Professional Learning Communities

With the advent of the 21st century, teacher professionalism, passing through three ages, has entered its fourth age – the postmodern age, which is full of diversity and challenges, requiring teachers to handle diverse, complex, and uncertain professional situations to protect and advance their professionalism. This age has several features, but the most significant one, based on increasing evidence, is the creation of strong professional cultures of collaboration to cope with complexity, uncertainty and reforms in teaching to promote continued teacher professional learning and development (Hargreaves, 2000). In the postmodern world, teaching has become increasingly complex, requiring the highest standards of professional practice to raise academic standards and student achievement (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996). A significant factor in raising educational standards and student achievement is improving teachers' instructional capacity in the classroom. Previous research highlighted some critical characteristics of PLD, establishing it as an ongoing, context-specific, collaborative, and inquiry-based enterprise (The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR), 2004; Knapp et al., 2003; Shah & Campbell, 2023). Teacher PLD efforts incorporating these features while extending the frontiers of teachers' professional knowledge enhance their teaching competence and instructional flexibility, contributing to their ongoing professional growth. An effective PLC has a convincing scope for serving as a platform that embodies all the essential qualities required to enhance the PLD of its member teachers despite them being at different rungs of a career ladder.

Theoretically centred in Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) situated learning and community of practice theory, a PLC is premised upon two assumptions: First, that knowledge is situated in the professional lives and learning experiences of teachers and collaborative critical reflection of teachers on those learning experiences will render the best understanding of professional knowledge (Buysse et al., 2003). Second, teachers' active engagement in a PLC increases their professional knowledge and skills, enhancing student learning (Vescio et al., 2008). Along the same lines, DuFour (2004) identified three *big ideas* to guide the work of professional learning communities: a) a focus on learning, b) a culture of collaboration, and c) a focus on results. The broader acceptance of learning as a social process and the role of PLC in the learning and development of educational professionals have convinced experts in the field of education to view setting up of PLCs as a promising strategy for teachers' lifelong PLD (Fullan & Germain, 2006; Senge et al., 2012). A PLC, for that matter, strives to develop congenial working conditions through collaborative work cultures (Thompson, Gregg & Niska, 2004), where the essence of learning and development is a steady, positive, and ongoing interaction among its members (Enthoven & Bruijn, 2010).

Key Features of a Professional Learning Community (PLC)

A quick review of the works of Mercer (2000); AISR (2004); Stoll et al. (2006), and Vescio et al. (2008) renders a comprehensive list of standard key features highlighting the strength of a PLC in an educational setting. These features include shared beliefs and values, the collective identity of PLC members, a history of shared experience, capacity for continuous teacher learning, a clear focus on student learning, collaboration/interaction and participation, interdependence or reciprocal obligation, concern for individual and minority views, meaningful, harmonized relationships, supportive structural conditions such as availability of time and space for PLC affairs, and reflective professional inquiry – a kind of reflective exchange of ideas on important issues.

Criticism on The Theory

Undoubtedly, situated learning and CoP theory offer a comprehensive account of social learning. However, at least three perceived weaknesses have been underscored by various researchers in this theory (see Fuller et al., 2005; Hager & Hodkinson, 2011; Haneda, 2006). First, probably with persistent voices calling for a review of the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* in a CoP, this concept has faded in later works on the theory. In their earlier work, Lave and Wenger (1991) presented the master-apprentice relation as the decentred, which “leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part” (p.94). In other words, they conceived learning as a movement from peripheral to full participation in a community of practice instead of the acquisition of knowledge within an individual's mind (Wubbels, 2007). If a CoP is composed of novices, less and more experienced teachers, and experts, the idea of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) seems short of encompassing the diversity of calibre and potential of individual participants. However, it applies well to teachers at the early

stages of their careers as they must learn the norms and develop professional knowledge of the domain of that particular community. Moreover, later studies suggest that patterns and forms of participation in a CoP are highly diverse, and learning in a CoP is not as simple and centripetal as conceived in LPP (Fuller et al., 2005).

Second, owing to the theory's radical stance on the embeddedness of learning in the social context, it falls short in its perspective on how individuals are shaped by their engagement in the learning process and how they experience a change in their identities as a result of peripheral to full participation in communities of practice (Hager & Hodkinson, 2011). Third, although in the context of a non-formal or organizational setting, a CoP may function smoothly with relative stability, in academic institutions, due to their hierarchical and centralized structures, issues of power and control may crop up, which Lave and Wenger failed to address in their theory (Fuller et al., 2005; Haneda, 2005). Notwithstanding the limitations of the theory, most of which were reconsidered by Wenger (1998) and Wenger et al. (2002) in their later works, they have made a substantial contribution to social learning theory.

Ideas Relevant to the Construct of PLC from Other Disciplines

Our awareness of the problems in the research context and familiarity with the ideas, such as *synergy*, *abundance/scarcity mentality*, *empathic listening*, *maturity*, and *integrity*, as defined by Covey (1989) in his magnum opus, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, impelled us to take an unusually broad view of a PLC – its structure and characteristics – in our efforts to make a substantial difference in the professional lives and learning of the participants in our PLC. Therefore, we discuss some ideas from Covey's (1989) seminal work that, although fall in the ambit of Social Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, have relevance to the formation and optimal functioning of an effective PLC. Some aspects of these ideas overlap with the features of a PLC mentioned above, others expand upon the construct of PLC, and still others look at PLC from a completely different angle.

Synergy

According to Covey (1989), *synergy* means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (1+1=3 or more). Synergy is the desired outcome of all interdependent, collaborative projects or practices. Strangely enough, despite being a natural characteristic of a PLC, synergy has not been paid due attention in the available literature on PLC, except as a passing reference in Wenger's (2006) work published on his personal website. Covey (1989) considers *synergy* an essential habit for highly effective people and defines it as the habit of creative cooperation or teamwork. For him, synergy is "effectiveness in an interdependent reality – it is teamwork, team building, the development of unity and creativity with other human beings" (Covey, 1989, p. 283).

Another construct that has an interesting relevance to a PLC is *Master Mind*, which also has a strong similitude to *synergy*. Napoleon Hill (1930) coined the term *Master Mind* in his classic book, *Ladder to Success*. After 20 years of research and analyses of the success of 50 people, Hill concluded that the Master Mind association was a critical

element in achieving great success (Brecher, 2004). He defined the Master Mind as the “coordination of knowledge and effort of two or more people, in a spirit of harmony, for the attainment of a definite purpose” (Hill, 1937, p. 343). The Master Mind process pools group members’ knowledge, skills, and creativity and strives to achieve shared aims. Hill (1937) believed that the Master Mind group had intangible potentialities of power and a psychic quality in its constitution, and “no two minds ever come together without thereby creating a third, invisible, intangible force, which may be likened to a third mind” (P. 344). According to Hill (1937):

The human mind is a form of energy, part of it spiritual in nature...when the minds of two or more people coordinate in a spirit of harmony, the spiritual units of energy of each mind form an affinity, which constitutes the “psychic” phase of the Master Mind (Hill, 1937, p. 344-5).

In a Master Mind group, energy, turning into an extreme form of *synergy*, amplifies the strength of each individual member and makes them highly effective in their work.

Abundance Mentality and Scarcity Mentality

In the vast literature on PLC theory, one can conveniently encounter the themes of collaboration, interaction, participation, collective enterprise and interdependence, but the mention of *abundance mentality*, which is the guiding principle of all these synergetic activities, is hard to find (Covey, 1989). Covey (1989) coined the idea of *abundance mentality*, a concept in which a person believes there are enough resources and success to share with others. *Scarcity mentality* is contrasted with *abundance mentality*, reflecting a destructive and unnecessary competition founded on the idea that someone else’s win or success in a situation means you lose, not considering the possibility of all parties winning (in some way or another) in a given situation. Individuals with an abundance mentality are able to celebrate the success of others rather than feel threatened by it. Covey (1989) contended that the abundance mentality arises from having a high self-worth and security, leading to sharing expertise, profits, recognition, and responsibility.

Empathy, Integrity, and Maturity

Empathy is a deep and genuine understanding of others’ feelings; it is a willingness to seek first to understand, and then to be understood. When we listen to someone with empathy, we intend to understand their frame of reference and feelings. For empathetic listening, one must listen with their ears, their eyes, and their heart (Covey, 1989). Without empathetic listening, genuine collaboration is not possible. Respect and concern for individual and minority views, particularly the opinions of people on the periphery, can only be ‘heard’ if we listen to them passionately and compassionately.

Integrity is the cornerstone of collaboration in a PLC. It means aligning our actions with our principles and treating everyone with the same set of principles. Covey (1989) defined *integrity* as “the foundation of trust which is essential to cooperation and long-term personal and interpersonal growth” (p. 34). If collaboration among PLC members is to endure, the principle of integrity must pervade the PLC.

For Covey (1989), *maturity* is the balance between *courage* and *consideration*: The ability to express one's feelings and convictions with courage balanced with consideration and regard for the feelings and convictions of others. To benefit from professional collaboration, members of a PLC must behave with maturity by demonstrating respect for each other's opinions. Especially, less experienced and new members, who are usually at the periphery during the early days, can easily get discouraged by immature responses or reactions to their ideas and contributions to the PLC.

The Study Design

The PLC Setup

To establish a PLC at the research site, we floated the idea among our colleagues. The initial response from the faculty was a bit cold and unnerving. However, we persevered, held discussions with our colleagues and friends, and persuaded them to participate in this project. At the start of a new academic year, we sent a formal invitation, with a brief description of the PLC objectives and key features (discussed above), to 52 colleagues to join our PLC. At the time of data collection, about six months after the establishment of the PLC, there were 14 active members of our PLC, and the number was slowly growing.

In view of the 4-level language program in our institute, we made four tiers of the PLC, i.e. PLC level 1 (beginner), PLC level 2 (elementary), PLC level 3 (pre-intermediate) & PLC level 4 (intermediate). However, in the first two modules, we were able to make the two tiers work effectively, considering the number of available teachers. In the first module, we had eight teachers in PLC level 1 and six teachers in PLC level 4, while in the second module, we had six teachers in PLC level 2 and eight teachers in PLC level 4. As mentioned earlier, Students enrolled at the ELI are placed into four levels based on their language proficiency, and teachers get a fresh schedule in every module. As we had teachers teaching at different levels, a four-tier PLC seemed more feasible in terms of the focus of activities and management. Each tier of the PLC was headed by a committed teacher who coordinated with members of their PLC, assigned them tasks according to their interests and expertise, invited their feedback, and shared all the collected resources within the group. Almost all the members were actively participating in their relevant tier of PLC in terms of material production for language lessons, feedback on each other's work, sharing exclusive personal TESOL-related materials, helping each other in lesson planning and providing focused support to newly recruited faculty members. We stayed in touch with all the tiers of PLC through emails and periodic meetings during office hours to facilitate its smooth functioning.

All along, our participation in the PLC, interdependence, *synergy*, and *abundance mentality* had been our watchwords. We constantly urged all the members, especially the heads of PLC tiers, to conduct themselves with *integrity*, *maturity*, and *empathy* (as defined by Covey, 1989, see 3.4) in the affairs of our PLC. All the members were briefed about the PLC objectives in the inauguration meeting, and all the relevant terms were explained to them orally as well as in a memo. At the end of the first semester (first

two modules), we conducted an evaluation of the PLC to see the impact of teachers' participation experience in the PLC on their professional learning and student achievement and whether our leadership was "a catalyst for change" (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017, p. 356).

METHOD

Conducted in the ambit of the Interpretive Research Paradigm, which conceives *reality* as relative and socially constructed, the current study was underpinned by ethnographic research methodology. As we followed this qualitative methodology in this inquiry to delve into the participants' 'natural' experiences, capturing the true essence of their thoughts and feelings, we were "interested in the ways that people describe and understand themselves and their actions and their interactions with others" (Tedder, 2012, p. 322). Considering that ethnography allows researchers to identify and empathize with their research participants, helping them bridge the gap between teachers and researchers as well as theory and practice, it can be effectively utilized for studying academic institutions, curriculum problems, classroom practices, and teachers' PLD (Colyar, 2003). Undoubtedly, our methodological choices enabled us to construct a *thick* and elaborate description of the phenomenon under study.

To evaluate the impact of their participation experience in the PLC on their PLD, we used two open-ended questionnaires designed by Wenger et al. (2011) to collect data from them: 1) *Personal value narrative* and 2) *Reflecting on value creation* in the PLC (Appendix 1&2). Wenger et al. (2011) have developed various questionnaires to evaluate different aspects of a CoP/PLC. We used these already prepared questionnaires for data collection because the flexible nature and detailed guidelines provided by Wenger et al. (2011) to complete these questionnaires helped the participants conveniently evaluate the value created by the PLC for their roles as English language teachers. Additionally, these questionnaires were the latest and developed by someone who was one of the pioneers on the subject. These questionnaires aimed to capture the short narratives of their learning experience in the PLC, covering details of their engagement, activities, interactions, and the outcome of their roles and responsibilities as members of the PLC. In addition to these tools, we had several informal discussions with them to pick their brains and see things in a larger picture. We hope the findings of this inquiry and the variety of factors identified in the literature review will bestow some epistemological authority on our vision of an effective PLC, which can potentially develop its participants into *highly effective* teachers.

Participants

We selected six of 14 PLC members for data collection (see Table 1). Following a purposive sampling approach, we collected data from only those who were more active than the others in the PLC and readily available for participation in the study.

Table 1
Profiles of participants in the PLC

#	Teachers' Pseudonyms	Qualifications	Total Experience	Experience in Research Context	Role
1	M.A.	EdD in TESOL (ongoing), M.A. Linguistics & Literature, CELTA	12	5	Head Level 1 PLC
2	MO	MA Linguistics & Literature, CELTA, DELTA	8	5	Member
3	IR	MA English Literature, MA ELT	12	7	Member
4	AB	MA Linguistics & Literature, MA Applied Linguistics	12	7	Head Level 4 PLC
5	SK	MA English, MA International Policy Development	21	8	Member
6	ZA	MA English	24	8	Member

Data Analysis

The data collected through the two questionnaires were fed into NVivo software for thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted based on the understanding derived from the rigorous qualitative data analysis protocols developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), Bazeley (2013), and Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Figure 1). On the first reading, vital information was highlighted, and key data points were carefully perused and inductively coded.

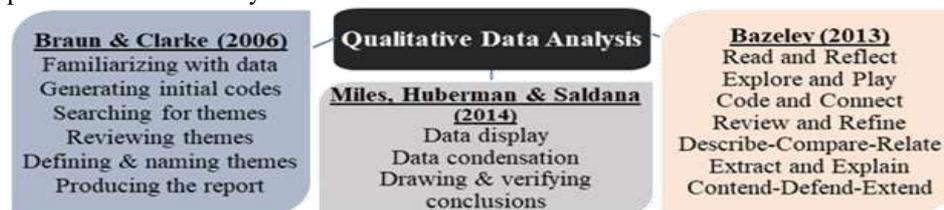


Figure 1
Approach to thematic data analysis

Following an iterative approach throughout the data analysis process, the coded data were condensed into 31 Categories. After several reviews and refinement of the data, the 31 categories were collapsed under five major themes (see Appendix C), facilitating the interpretation and further conceptualization of the issues raised and opinions expressed in the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data collected through two questionnaires from the six participants rendered five major themes and several categories (see Appendix C). The categories are merged and discussed in the Findings and Discussion section under their relevant major theme. Some of the main themes and categories (sub-themes) that emerged from the data

also correlated with the ideas and constructs discussed in the literature review on PLCs. The significant findings, with a concise discussion, are set forth below.

Interdependence

A PLC is built on the foundation of *interdependence*. The data analysis showed interdependence as a major theme underlying the PLC. There existed a mutually beneficial, interdependent relationship among the members of the PLC:

For me, sharing is the key idea. It motivates me to help and get help from other colleagues because this is the only way out that can lead us towards professional development and personal learning. I have shared my own collection of material and got access to the material created by my colleagues...Indeed, participation contributed effectively to lessening my own isolation and professional loneliness. (M.A.)

It's been a great way for cross-fertilization of ideas. Participation in the PLC has given me access to various resources and methods, which my learned colleagues have already been using successfully in their classes. These shared resources are of great value to the PLC. (S.K.)

In fact, we live in a social world where constructive human networking has tremendous value for the participants in the network. Ours is an interdependent planet and an interdependent reality in which the well-being of each part is tied to the overall well-being of the whole (Covey, 2011). Interdependence is based on a shared vision and a win/win frame of mind. In the context of PLC, interdependence is transformational in nature because “it literally changes those who are party to it...It is the ultimate ‘moving of the fulcrum’ – the exponential increase of creativity, capacity, and production that comes from combining the energy and talents of many in synergistic ways” (Covey & Merrill, 1994, p. 196). Indeed, our truly interdependent relationships empower us to develop strong bonding, be sincere friends, give honest feedback, and communicate in authentic ways:

Participation is fun, and I feel more involved when it comes to language teaching. In the beginning, I felt less active and probably less inspired, but now I feel that I can be as useful to the group as anyone else. This has done a world of good to my confidence. (I.R.)

Among the qualities of interdependent individuals, integrity is at the top of the list. Covey (1989) claimed that the principles of integrity and honesty are “the foundation of trust which is essential to cooperation and long-term personal and interpersonal growth” (p. 34). He defined that integrity as an interdependent reality simply means that you treat everyone by the same set of principles. When you do that, people will come to trust you. And undoubtedly, building trust is indispensable for any collaborative enterprise. A few comments in the data revealed that some teachers were reluctant to share their personal resource materials with other colleagues:

I don't feel any hesitation in sharing [my resources]. I think that this is a remarkable way to develop ourselves. However, some of the [PLC] members

were passive or reluctant to contribute, but their remarks during face-to-face discussions were quite useful. (M.A.)

It is a common issue in life, but one can experience its extreme form in competitive educational setups, such as the research site, where a higher score in annual faculty evaluations brings monetary and career benefits. There may be different context-specific reasons for such behaviour, but we would like to discuss the one identified and confirmed by Covey (1989) after his extensive research on thousands of people. He believed that due to cultural overlay, we get hardwired with the notion of *scarcity mentality* in our early life, which promotes adversarial competition instead of developing the ideas of abundance mentality and opportunity in life.

On the contrary, sharing our ideas and resources with others can be intrinsically rewarding. According to Robbins (1991), there is no richer emotion than a genuine contribution to others' life and work, and this reality dawned on some participants after a short while in the PLC:

It was a great experience to share one's ideas and resources with other colleagues; their input was really valuable and trustworthy. I also have a sense of contribution, and I feel more confident and believe in myself more than I did before. (Z.A.)

Abundance Mentality can also help address another primary concern in synergetic PLCs: the status of less-synergetic participants. As Hodkinson et al. (2008) pointed out that "One way of making a learning culture more synergistic is to exclude people who do not fit in. In one of the most synergistic sites...who did not fit in were cooled out, or even expelled" (p. 44). Thanks to the works of Stephen R. Covey (1989, 2011), we took the opposite way and introduced the concept of *Abundance Mentality* as one of the foundational principles of our PLC. No matter how little or less effective the level of participation in the PLC is, the resource materials developed by the participants will be accessible to all the members of the PLC. Additionally, if anyone from the large faculty of the ELI asks for any kind of qualitative or quantitative support, besides the fact that they have contributed anything or not, they will be offered unconditional access to our resources. In our context, the PLC experience suggests that *abundance mentality* is a prerequisite for every durable and genuinely interdependent enterprise, and members of a PLC should be educated and convinced about the significance of such behaviour.

Empathy and Maturity

The comments of the PLC members brought another area of concern to light: Some members do not contribute because they fear criticism and ridicule from other colleagues. Such feelings in any member of a PLC reflect a lack of empathy and maturity somewhere in the community. Empathy is a deep and genuine understanding of others' feelings. When we listen to a community member with empathy, we try to get inside their frame of reference. Without empathetic listening, no genuine feedback or support is possible. It is also a required characteristic for members of any genuine PLC:

I think people should be given ample time to learn how to trust and share and feel secure while sharing and contributing rather than making fun of them for committing mistakes. (M.A.)

Being part of the community makes it easy for me to know whom to turn to for help and information when I have a question. Our group has developed a lot of trust; they are like friends to me. (I.R.)

Another critical feature for the strength and long-term survival of a PLC is the quality of maturity among the members. The PLC members should be advised to express their feelings and convictions with courage; however, it should be tempered with consideration for the feelings and convictions of others:

I joined this community hoping to learn from other teachers, and it really helped me a lot as a teacher because I have new ideas now that I've got from other teachers in the community. Now, I have a community where I can trust people and share without any fear. (A.B.)

My experience with the professional learning community is really positive. I learnt how to be patient, give feedback positively, respect others' opinions and apply interpersonal skills. (MO)

Our participation and collaboration in a PLC will not be beneficial if we lack maturity. Immaturity on the part of one member can easily repel or discourage another member of a PLC; it can be particularly fatal for new and less-experienced members at the periphery.

Synergy

Aristotle's teachings resonate even after 2400 years, and several of his core concepts remain relevant today. He believed that "in the case of all things which have several parts, the whole is something besides the parts." Analysis of the participants' feedback comments highlighted the prevalence of *synergy* in the functioning of the PLC. Without any exception, all the members acknowledged that they were teaching more effectively with less effort and experienced great ease and comfort with a substantial reduction in work-related stress. Earlier, every teacher had to prepare for 18 hours of weekly language teaching alone; in the PLC, 6 to 8 teachers were working together, with the division of labour, to prepare for those 18 hours.

I have seen the practical application of the idea of synergy. It was a great experience as the amount of time I used to spend on preparing my lessons reduced quite considerably. (M.A.)

The experience of being part of this professional community was truly valuable and enjoyable. It enabled me to achieve more with less effort, and together we were able to achieve a lot more than what we would accomplish otherwise. As a matter of fact, whenever I sit down to plan materials for my lessons, I find myself in a situation where I have a range of resources at my disposal. Not only am I

able to pick and choose from those resources, but I can also ask for my friends' input if needed. (I.R.)

Now I have loads of resources that I couldn't prepare before because I never had that much time. Working in the PLC, we divided our work and gave different tasks to each member. In this way, we were able to prepare quality stuff within no time. (A.B.)

There is a greater focus on some of the things/ideas which were not considered important before. Teaching has become more enjoyable and more relaxing as it gives me plenty of time to generate new ideas. Now with little effort, I could be much more productive. (S.K.)

Working in this group provided me with loads of activities that can easily be used in pairs, groups or individually. Before joining this group, I had to spend a lot of time designing and planning activities and worksheets, but the PLC helped me save time and use it more effectively. (MO)

Certainly, I have access to more material, which is diverse and plenty. Of course, when the ready-made material is at hand, one saves time, which can be used for some other activity... Particularly, the whole exercise could be more fruitful at lower levels where students are greatly dependent upon the teacher, and he can really do more in the limited time he has by resorting to these resources. (Z.A.)

There is no doubt that “synergy is a miracle. It is a fundamental principle at work throughout the natural world.... Birds in a V formation can fly nearly twice as far as a lone bird because of the updraft created by the flapping of their wings” (Covey, 2011, p. 12-13). Likewise, if teachers collaborate in a unified and harmonized fashion, they can generate tremendous creative energy to accomplish academic feats, as the synergy resulting from their collaborative activities can be transformative for their professional selves, enhancing their professional competence and benefitting their students' learning (Shah, 2022).

Teacher Professional Learning and Development

One of the key aims of a PLC is teacher professional learning and development. The members of the PLC unanimously agreed that their participation in this initiative brought multiple pedagogical and professional benefits:

It was very rewarding for me because I have practised many new things learnt from my colleagues. Particularly, the effective and better use of technology is a valuable addition to my own teaching methodology. In addition, I got an insight into utilizing the textbook in a variety of ways. I can see that my goal to be an influential and effective teacher can easily be attained if this practice [participation in the PLC] continues in the future. (M.A.)

I refined and enriched my existing knowledge by adding new and modern English language teaching tools, which I learned and practised while working

with this group. It also made it possible for me to know how the senior teachers conduct activities in their classes. Having a tough teaching schedule limits opportunities for professional development. This community greatly helped me to brush up my TESOL knowledge in the most efficient way. Being a part of this community also increased my confidence as a teacher. (MO)

The findings suggest that participation in the PLC strengthened teachers' contextual awareness, particularly if they came from a different context or country, which is a common phenomenon in educational institutions in the Gulf, where the number of foreign teachers is much higher than the local teachers. Whenever a teacher, who is less familiar with the context, faces any pedagogical challenge or disciplinary issue or feels less sure about cultural sensitivities, they can share those in the PLC and seek guidance from senior, more context-aware colleagues:

Tasks assigned to individuals in the group were carried out without delay, and the deadlines were always met. Materials prepared by group members and presented before the group for their perusal were constantly reviewed and critiqued...I have had the opportunity to learn so much from other colleagues, and I have gained some new insights and ideas in the field of language teaching. Also, we have been developing some lesson plans together and sharing material almost daily. (I.R.)

As a teacher, there is always something new to learn and teach from a different angle that makes a lot of difference. With participation [in the PLC], skills are enhanced naturally, and the level of confidence increases as one is equipped better to handle teaching with more resources...For sure, the performance level has gone up. The idea of being a member of a group whose objective is to help the students is in itself rewarding. (Z.A.)

There is no doubt that teaching is an intellectually demanding profession requiring teachers to hold numerous strings and carry an enormous burden of responsibility. Their approach to teaching, personality, the power to motivate, make learning meaningful and provide something that pupils refer to as "fun" represent the real foundation upon which students' judgement of the learning experience is based (Chambers, 1999, p. 137). To support teachers to live up to their professional expectations, collaboration and collegiality in a PLC play a significant role in their PLD. For instance, with an ongoing process of engagement in the PLC, community members developed new perspectives on their professional issues or challenges that helped them convert their implicit knowledge into explicit professional understanding, thus enhancing their reflective skills and professional competence (Choi, 2006).

With the constructive role of PLCs in lifelong teacher PLD already established, educational institutions should make an all-out effort to not only encourage the teachers for professional collaboration but also provide the requisite facilities for forming effective PLCs. In this way, they can ensure their teachers' ongoing PLD, enabling them to address their students' context-specific needs and aspirations and achieve their institutional and professional goals (Bolam et al., 2005; Hwang, 2021).

Student Achievement

The primary beneficiaries of an educational institution are students, and the *raison d'être* of all academic efforts is their learning and achievement. Teachers' participation in the PLC supported their professional learning and development (PLD) and thereby increased their capacity for high-quality instruction and course delivery, which in due course led to a considerable improvement in student learning and achievement:

I realized that the new ideas have really brought positive changes in my class, and my students get more involved in their lessons because all of us are teaching in the same context and experimenting with different strategies...When successful strategies are shared and practised, there are greater chances of producing better results. (M.A.)

The teachers' collaborative efforts equipped them with extensive, varied, and innovative teaching materials for English language learners. Hence, there was a marked improvement in students' class involvement, learning motivation, and rapport with their teachers:

I have made substantial gains in terms of being introduced to the latest techniques and approaches in the field of TESOL brought forth by our worthy group members for discussions. I have already tried some of these in my own classes, and the students' response has been heartening. More often than not, this worked great for me, and it clearly manifested in my students' improved participation and involvement in the class proceedings. It does make me feel more successful. (I.R.)

The huge resource material available in the PLC has made my classes more fun. My students enjoy it a lot because I always have new ideas for them to work on. I am also better able to tackle problematic students and know what to do when I have a problem with a student. In a way, my students are better managed now. (A.B.)

The overall performance of the students has increased, which definitely gives me more confidence as a teacher. The students also value the consistent effort of the teacher, and he commands greater genuine respect. (Z.A.)

As emphasized earlier that the ultimate goal of a PLC is to support teachers' PLD to enhance student learning and achievement (Bolam et al., 2005), the PLC members' feedback endorsed the positive impact of the PLC on their PLD, which inevitably increased student learning and achievement. The abundant resource materials developed through the synergistic efforts of all the PLC members enriched their professional and pedagogical repertoire, leading to teaching practice that was more effective and more engaging as well as highly motivational for the students. Anwar et al. (2021) also shared a similar finding from an Indonesian context that corroborated our result; they argue that a strong correlation exists between teachers' mutual collaboration and learning motivation leading to student achievement.

CONCLUSION

Becoming A Highly Effective Teacher

The current study aimed to set an example for establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) in challenging academic contexts while offering a strategic vision for *becoming highly effective* teachers through participation in synergistic PLCs. Cognizant of the fact that human beings tend to use metaphors to ease or enhance the process of verbalization, Hager and Hodkinson (2011) argue for utilizing the metaphor of *becoming* to elucidate the process of teacher PLD. Illuminating further, they have presented a critique of the three common metaphors of *acquisition*, *construction*, and *participation* used to see the product or the process of learning. They assert that when the features of learning as *construction* and learning as *participation* are combined, a new understanding of learning emerges, which can be captured in the metaphor of *Becoming*. For them, learning as *Becoming* – bridging dualistic trends such as mind and body, individual and social – conflates formal, informal, and non-formal learning, and conceives learning as an ongoing process, where one key aim is to develop teachers' context-specific knowledge and skills (Scanlon, 2011). For more clarity on context-specific knowledge, William James' (1907) distinction between 'knowledge about' and 'knowledge of' context is pertinent. The 'knowledge about' is unverified and untested, mostly based on hearsay, whereas 'knowledge of' is the context-specific, insider knowledge gained through first-hand experience in the context. The grasp of this context-specific knowledge is the main qualification for *becoming* a professional (Scanlon, 2011), which, as demonstrated in the study results, can be conveniently achieved in a synergistic, goal-driven PLC.

An important aspect to emphasize is that in the postmodern era, there is a growing recognition that teacher professional learning and development is a continual journey towards growth and enhanced effectiveness. In this context, success is viewed as a progressive course rather than a finite endpoint. To pursue this progressive course, perpetual, focused collaboration among teachers is not only highly desirable but also inevitable. One highly effective way to achieve the goal of teacher collaboration is through their participation in a synergetic PLC with clear objectives and a documented code of conduct based on proven principles, such as those outlined in the current study. It would be ideal if significant institutional support is available for establishing such goal-oriented PLCs; otherwise, self-motivated teachers or teacher leaders can take the initiative with firm resolve and careful planning. Needless to further emphasize that establishing a synergetic PLC will provide a robust platform for teachers to become highly effective in their academic context.

The study presented key themes from data and intriguing ideas from a broad literature review that are strung together to present a vision for *becoming a highly effective* teacher through participation in a synergetic PLC. More effective and dynamic, a synergetic PLC, which has "the solidarity of the group" as well as "the solidity or substance of its ideas and methods" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. 1), can also be envisaged as a *crucible* that can transform a raw teacher into a refined professional. If the characteristics of a PLC described in the study are taken care of, the results will not

be just tangible but spectacular. Notwithstanding some imperfection in the functioning of a PLC, *synergy* will be a natural outcome of genuine collaboration in all cases.

ENDNOTE

¹Following Timperley et al. (2007), I use the more representative and inclusive term – Professional Learning and Development (PLD) – to define the process of teacher continued learning instead of terms like In-service Education, Teacher Learning, Teacher Development, Professional Learning, Professional Development (P.D.), Lifelong Learning, Continuing Professional Development (CPD), Continuing Professional Learning (CPL), and Continuing PLD (CPLD).

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Appendix A

Questionnaire 1: Reflecting on value creation (key questions)

1) Immediate value: What happened, and what was my experience of it?

i) What were the significant events? What happened?

What was the quality of mutual engagement? How relevant to me was the activity/interaction?

Do I trust them enough to turn to them for help? Do I feel less isolated?

Comments:

ii) What access to resources has my participation given me?

Do I have new tools, methods, or processes?

Do I have access to documents or sources of information I would not have otherwise?

Comments:

2) Realized value: What difference has it made / or will make to my ability to achieve what matters to me or other stakeholders?

Did I save time or achieve something new?

Am I more successful generally? How?

Comments:

3) What difference do I feel after being a part of a TESOL Professional learning community?

Comments:

4) Any further suggestions

Appendix B

Questionnaire 2: Personal value narrative

Name: TESOL Professional Learning Community at ELI-xxx	How participation is changing me as a teacher (e.g., skills, attitude, identity, self- confidence, feelings, etc.)	How participation is affecting my social connections (e.g., number, quality, frequency, emotions, etc.)	How participation is helping my teaching practice (e.g., ideas, insights, lesson material, procedures, etc.)	How participation is changing my ability to influence my world as a teacher (voice, contribution, status, recognition, etc.)
Reasons for participation (e.g., challenges, aspirations, professional development goals, meeting people, etc.) +/-				
Activities, outputs, events, networking (e.g., lesson material, discussion, visits, etc.) +/-				
Value to me (e.g., being a better teacher, handling difficult students, improving my students learning, improving school performance, etc.) +/-				
Notes: 1. +/- Indicates that you can provide positive / negative experiences 2. Please read the sample answers before you give your responses.				

Appendix C
Categories and Themes

