



# Understanding how PLCs function

Lesson study PLCs in Motheo, Free State

August 2017

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# 1. Background

VVOB and FSDOE support subject advisors and teachers in Botshabelo, Motheo district in engaging with lesson study activities in the format of a PLC in the period February-October 2017. The focus of the lesson study sessions is to target all learners and hence promote differentiation and inclusive practices. VVOB entered in a collaboration with Jika Communication & Training to steer the lesson study.

Ten schools are selected in collaboration with FSDOE to engage in the lesson study PLCs. Two lesson study groups are selected per school, one for foundation phase and one for intermediate phase. This means that there are 20 PLCs in total.

VVOB conducted a study on a selection of PLCs to

- collect baseline information on the functioning and outcomes of PLCs for improved learning and teaching;
- pilot the data collection tools, which will be used to conduct the evaluation of the 12 PLCs which will be promoted with support from EU.

# 2. Methodology

## 2.1 Data collection

Data were collected in the form of

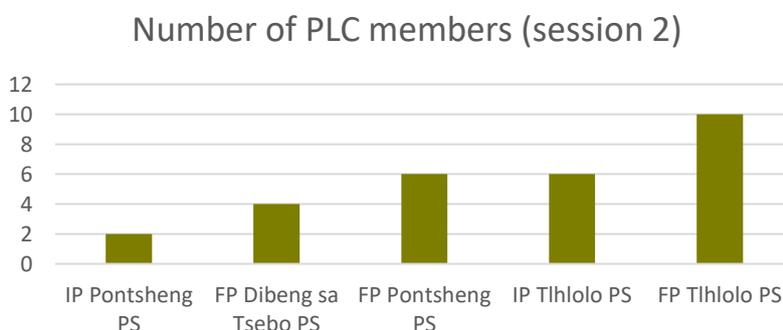
- A rubric for PLC observations. The rubric is built on the ten characteristics of an effective PLC, in line with the DBE PLC guidelines (DBE, 2015). The observations will give insights into the characteristics of PLCs and implications on their functioning.
- Focus group discussion guidelines. After each PLC observation, a focus group discussion was organised to further explore the ‘status’ of the PLC characteristics and the effectiveness of the PLC sessions to improve inclusive teaching practices.

## 2.2 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis was applied to the focus group data and rubric observation data, using the constant comparison method. After open coding the data, consistencies and differences were searched for resulting in the development of categories, linked to the characteristics of a PLC.

## 2.3 Respondents observations and focus group discussions

Data were collected from 5 of the 20 PLCs (3 Foundation Phase, 2 Intermediate Phase) during the 2<sup>nd</sup> PLC sessions. In total, there are 4 PLC sessions guided by Jika and mentored by district officials per PLC.

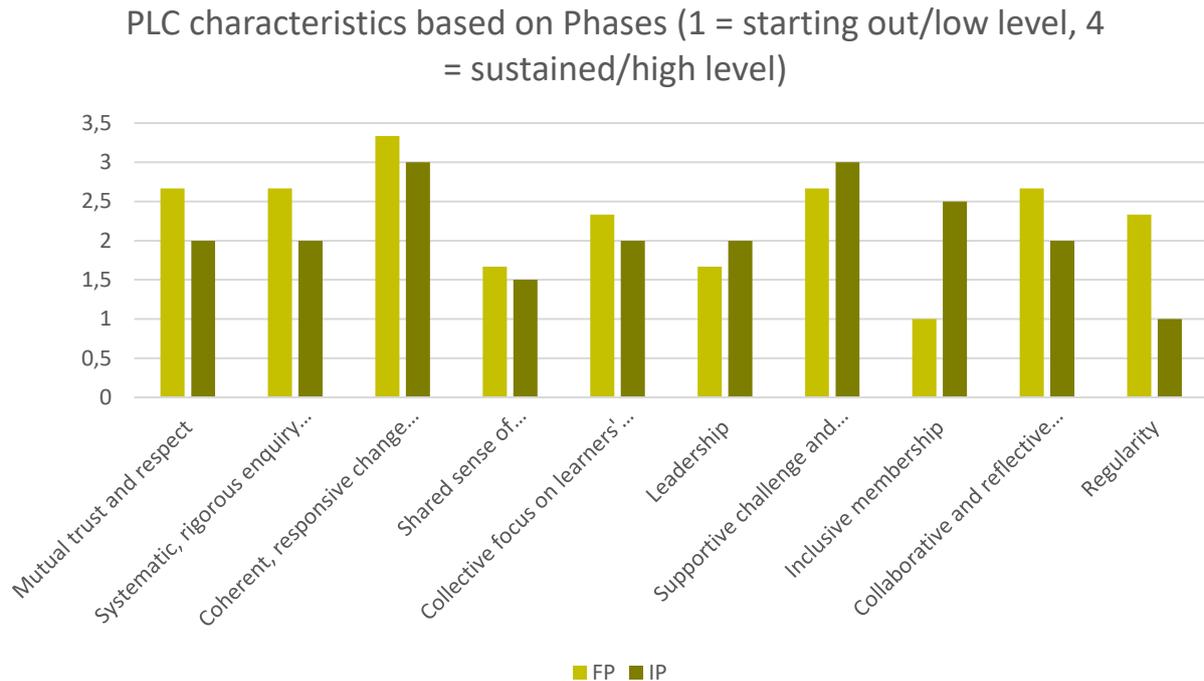


On average, there were 6 members per consulted PLC in these sessions. All PLC members were female.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 PLC Characteristics

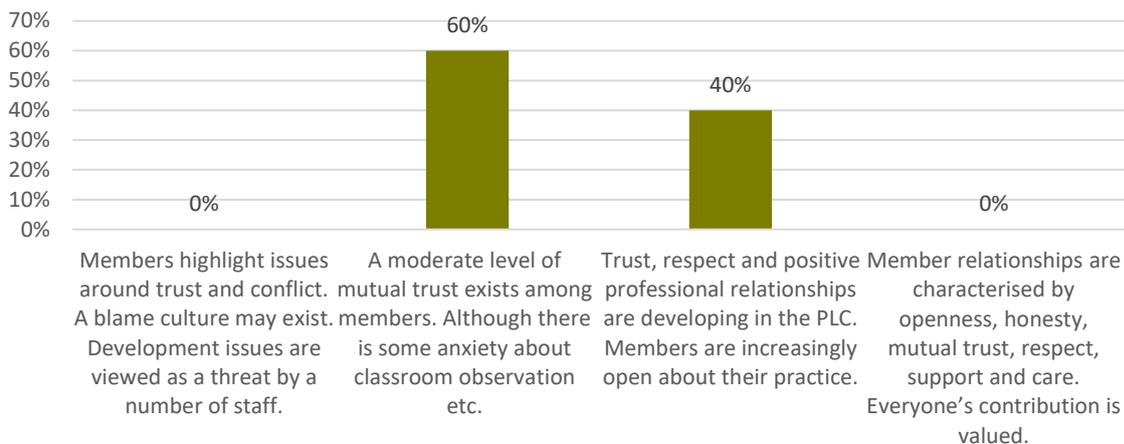
Analysing the ten characteristics of a PLC, according to the PLC guidelines from DBE (2015), the observed PLCs are in a developing stage. The PLCs seem to be coherent and responsive to changes in practice, compared to one-off forms of professional development. This can be explained by the activity engaged in in the PLCs. The activities addressed in the PLCs focus on lesson study. PLC participants collaboratively develop lesson plans, observe each other and give feedback on the lessons presented. These activities allow the PLC members to apply what was learned in their practice. The observed PLCs tend to be in a start-up phase to develop a shared vision and to have an inclusive membership.



Comparing the Foundation Phase (FP) with the Intermediate Phase (IP) PLCs, largest differences appear in the inclusive membership and regularity of the PLCs. The IP PLCs tend to be more inclusive than PLCs with FP teachers. The latter tend to be closed groups with limited room for external viewpoints. Whereas IP PLCs seem to stimulate the input of external viewpoints to increase diversity and learning in the PLC. Leadership in the PLCs with FP teachers is mostly taken up by the HoD. A possible explanation is the fact that FP teachers teach in the mother tongue. Communicating feedback in English in a PLC makes them less confident and possibly less articulate compared to the PLCs with IP teachers. Observations of the FP PLCs give indications it is likely these PLCs will continue working together to further explore the topics discussed. Such indications were not identified in the IP PLCs.

In the next section, we will have a closer look at each PLC characteristic as described in the DBE guideline on PLCs.

### 3.2 Mutual trust and respect



Most PLCs have a moderate level of mutual trust among the members with some indications of anxiety to open up their practice. This anxiety stemmed from being **unprepared** for the PLC session or from the fact of **being observed**:

“It’s not often that there is someone in class when I’m teaching.” (Pontsheng FP)

“We were not expecting visitors and then the other lady who was supposed to prepare was sick, so we were nervous.” (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

Especially in the FP PLCs, teachers were open and gave feedback in a respectful and professional way. This can be explained by the fact that the teachers in the PLCs **knew each other** and felt comfortable in the PLC. But creating this trust takes time.

“Because we know each other as we come from the same phase in the school, we also are familiar with each other.” (Dibeng sa Thebo FP)

“In our PLC we feel free and we trust each other. We are happy to learn from each other. Although some laugh when you make a mistake, we are encouraging them to stop it so that we don’t lose confidence.” (Thlolo FP)

“Some are not discussing a lot because they are still new.” (Thlolo FP)

Another contributing factor for mutual trust is the fact that teachers are **getting used to the PLC concept**:

“We also have another PLC in our cluster which involves other schools as well. We are getting used to the idea.” (Dibeng sa Thebo FP)

One of the PLCs stressed the importance of **team spirit** in working together to improve their teaching. They relied on each other and assisted each other.

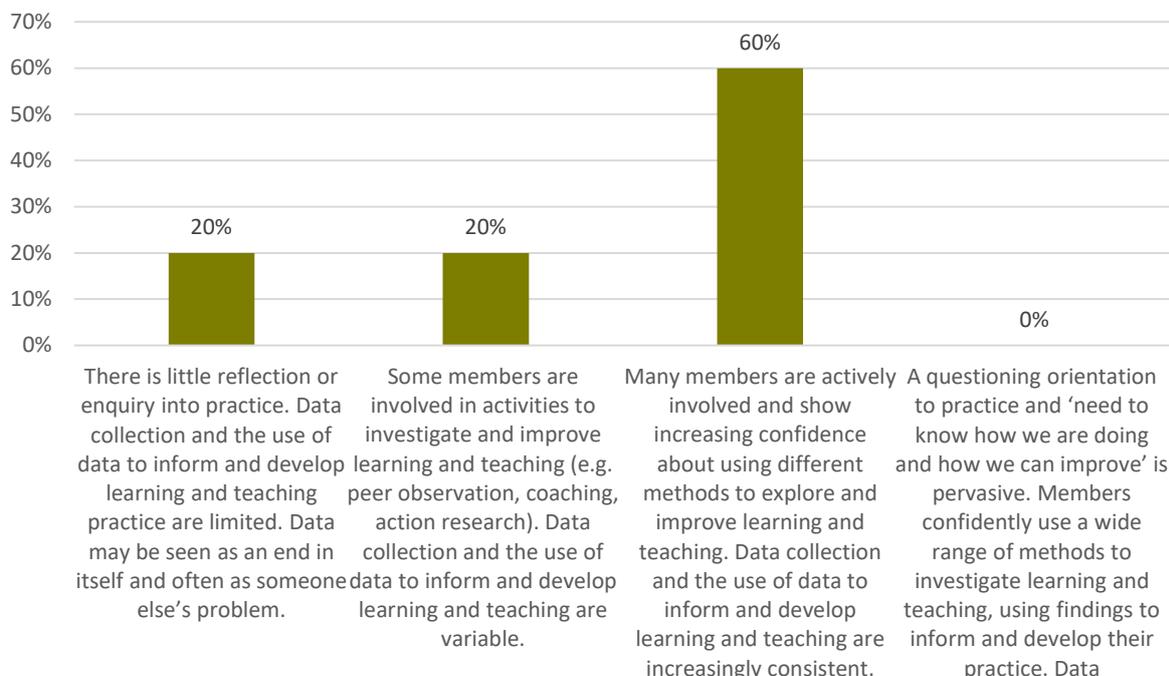
“We have created a foundation for a strong team. We want to encourage each other and not lose members. We will encourage each other when we feel that we are losing the spirit and strength to continue.” “Also our team spirit encourages us. We know we are not perfect and we want to develop ourselves.” (Thlolo FP)

### 3.3 Relevance in practice

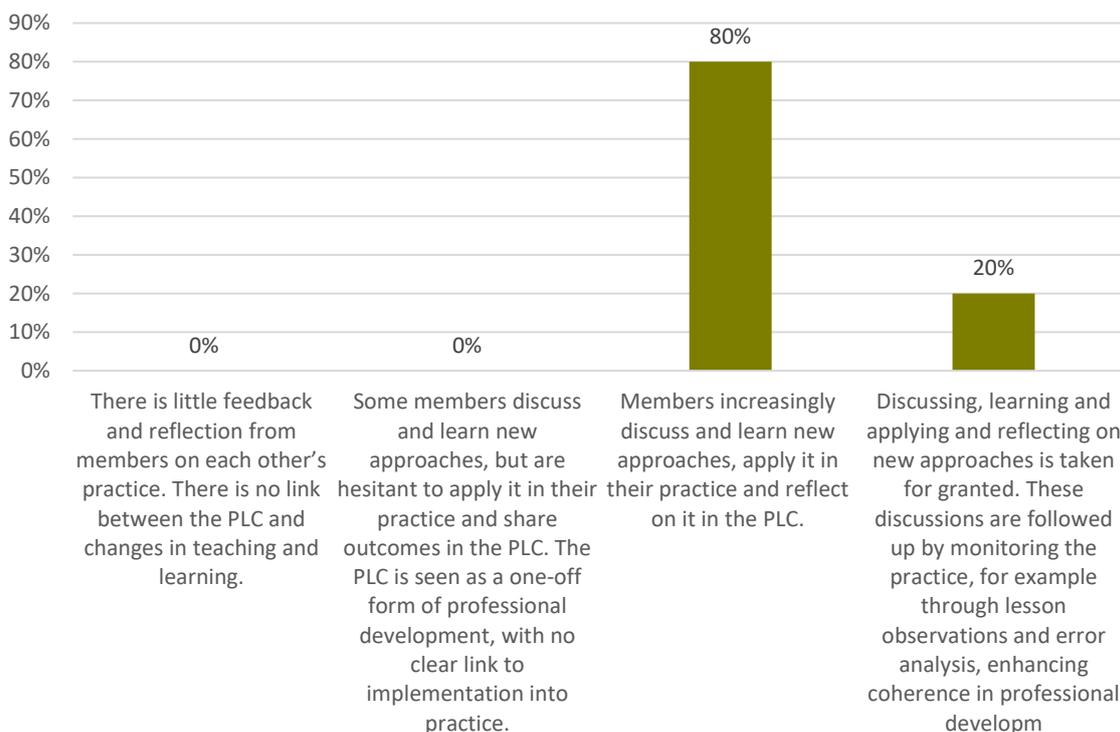
Data collected for the following two characteristics informed how **relevant** the PLC sessions were for application into practice:

- Systematic, rigorous enquiry into practice
- Coherent, responsive change in practice

#### Systematic, rigorous enquiry into practice



#### Coherent, responsive change in practice



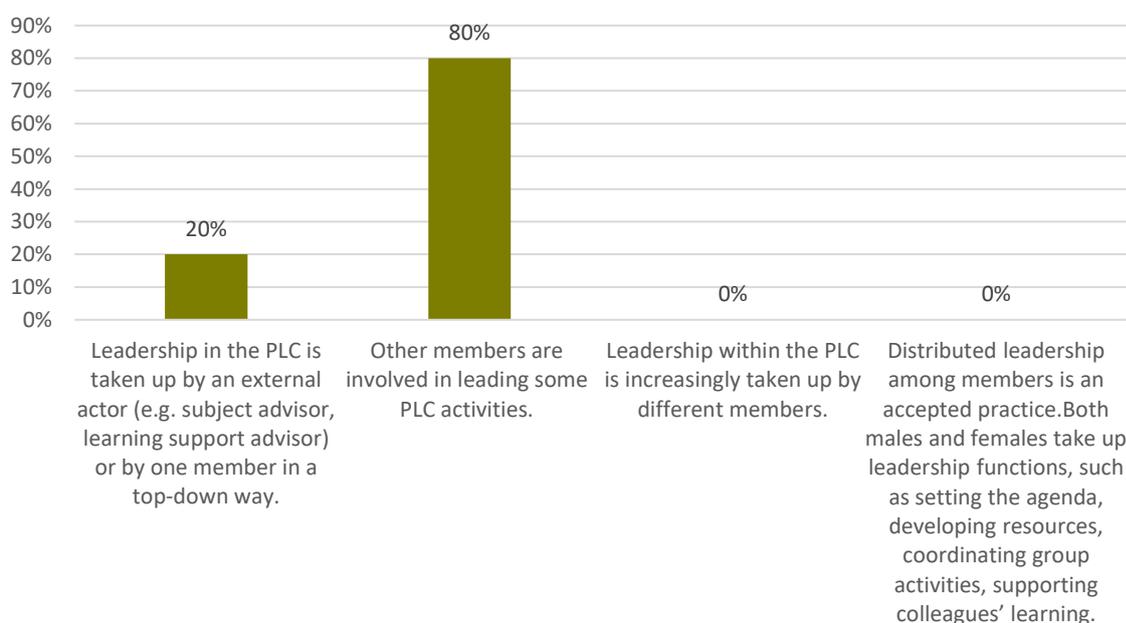


All observed PLCs showed evidence of teachers **sharing viewpoints on (new) teaching strategies in their classroom practice**. Teachers discussed these approaches thoroughly from a practical point of view. This can be explained by the activities engaged in in these PLCs. Lesson study involves preparing lesson plans, observing each other's lessons and giving constructive feedback. This approach helps teachers to apply it in their practice and to reflect on it in the next PLC session. No data were consulted from personal or nation-wide assessments.

"It is easy to come up with a good lesson plan that accommodates learner diversity if you do it in a PLC." (Thlolo IP)

"I learnt how best I can use the follow me card in fractions." (Thlolo IP)

### 3.4 Leadership



The **external facilitator** had an active leadership role in most observed PLCs, but mostly in combination with examples of **distributed leadership** amongst the teachers. The latter involved leading the discussions during and after the lesson observations, timekeeping and recording the discussion observations.

"We think we could continue on our own even after Ria [external facilitator] has gone." (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

"Although it took some time to have a person to lead the proceedings but we finally had a chairperson, scribe and presenter." (Thlolo IP)

In one PLC, a teacher was selected to act as the facilitator but she was not ready to do so leading to the external facilitator guiding the discussions.

The role of the external facilitator focused on **enriching the discussion**, for instance by ensuring that the lesson targets all learners in class. The external facilitator is perceived as a **good motivator** for the PLC.

"Ria [external facilitator] also motivates us. When we came to the first session we were angry because we had not been informed on time. We were told on the very day that we were meeting and it was a Monday which was not good. Then later when we sat down with Ria, the way she did her thing made us like it and from then on we liked it. We enjoy it now; we even make it more practical by having learners in the demos. Ria also makes us feel

proud to be teachers and says we can be proud like other professionals whether they are lawyers or doctors.” (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

“She [external facilitator] is dedicated, she puts much effort and strength. She made us see that this is not a waste of time.” (Pontsheng FP)

The DBE guideline on PLCs (2015, p.7) states that “supportive school management is a major condition for effective PLCs”. Teachers from two PLCs indicated that they are satisfied with the **support they receive from their SMT**.

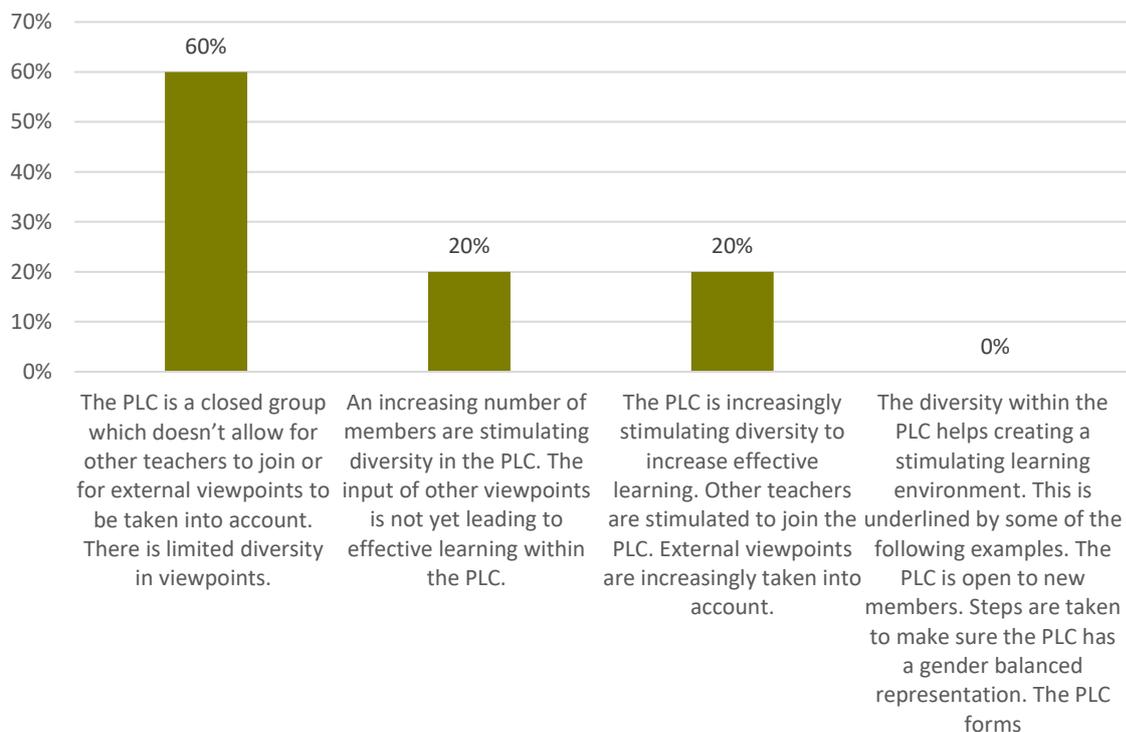
“Our principal and deputy motivate and support us.”

“The principal is supportive because he has allowed the PLC to take place in the school.”

“Our HoD also takes part in the lesson study PLC so we feel that the idea is supported.”

In two other PLCs, support from the SMT was absent. Teachers feel the schools are not providing sufficient resources for the PLC. One PLC mentioned that the HoD doesn’t show interest in the PLC sessions.

### 3.5 Inclusive membership



Given the activities of the PLCs, the observed PLCs are **mostly a closed group**. The lesson study cycle requests the same teachers to work on specific activities. Moreover, an external facilitator was present in all PLCs **bringing in expertise and alternative viewpoints**. Two PLCs would like to open up their membership to enrich the PLC:

“We could want others to come so as to get other viewpoints as it could lead to growth and development. We want both negative and positive viewpoints.” (Pontsheng FP)

“We like external visitors like yourself. Your questions are opening up our eyes to some things we did not think about.” (Thlolo FP)

“Commitment and participation of senior managers, e.g. subject advisors, is very important so that they can give guidance on other matters.” (Pontsheng IP)

“It [the PLC] should include other school’s bodies to improve the quality of the deliberations.” (Pontsheng IP)

“We need more assistance from external experts to assist us with lesson plans. As you can see that Ria and her colleagues are helping us a great deal.” (Thlolo IP)

In one PLC, new members joined in the second session, which implicated the efficiency of the PLC. New members needed time to get familiar with the concept and were hesitant to speak up during discussions. Teachers were not sure whether it was wise to get others to join the PLC when it had already made some progress. If other teachers joined now, they felt that they might not be able to cope. However, other teachers felt that new teachers could also benefit of being members by listening and observing what happened in the PLC.

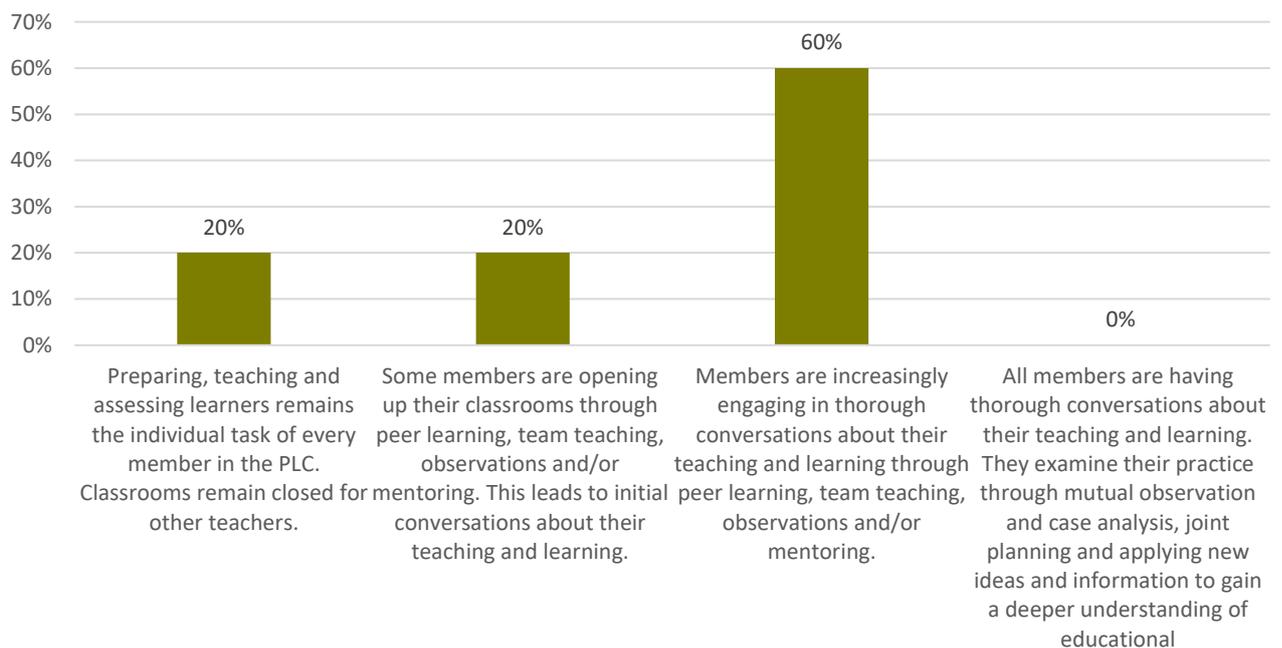
In all observed PLCs, all members were female.

### 3.6 Collaboration to reach all learners

Data collected for the following four characteristics give indications on how teachers collaborate with each other to improve their teaching to reach all learners:

- Collaborative and reflective enquiry
- Collective responsibility for student learning
- Shared vision and focus on learning for all learners
- Support challenge and constructive critique

Collaborative and reflective enquiry / collective responsibility for student learning



In most PLCs observed, teachers planned the lesson together and discussed different teaching strategies. Lesson demonstrations were done with consecutive discussions showing that teachers are learning from each other. “That lesson taught us that when we work together you can overcome the problems you have in class. Practical examples play a major role in problem solving. Learners cannot forget the lesson because of the experiential part, eg, the taxi drive role play that was used in the lesson. We learn from each other.” (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

“The PLC influences us a lot in our practice. Teachers can learn different things from each other. For example, if one teacher is not confident in teaching division, then another in the group is good at that then you can learn from them. We are influenced by each other because we can see and discuss the lesson plans together. We can see how others do things and we learn especially in the practical demonstrating of lessons. Collaboration with others helps as we get different ideas.” (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)



“It was a nice experience as it is good to have colleagues as they can help where you lack. I believe it is a good way for development. I learnt from observing the others, eg, the way she (one of the teachers) assessed the learners. It has a good influence on our practice as we learn from each other and share ideas. Also how to keep time. We take from each other different strategies. There is **personal growth coming from each other.**” (Pontsheng FP)

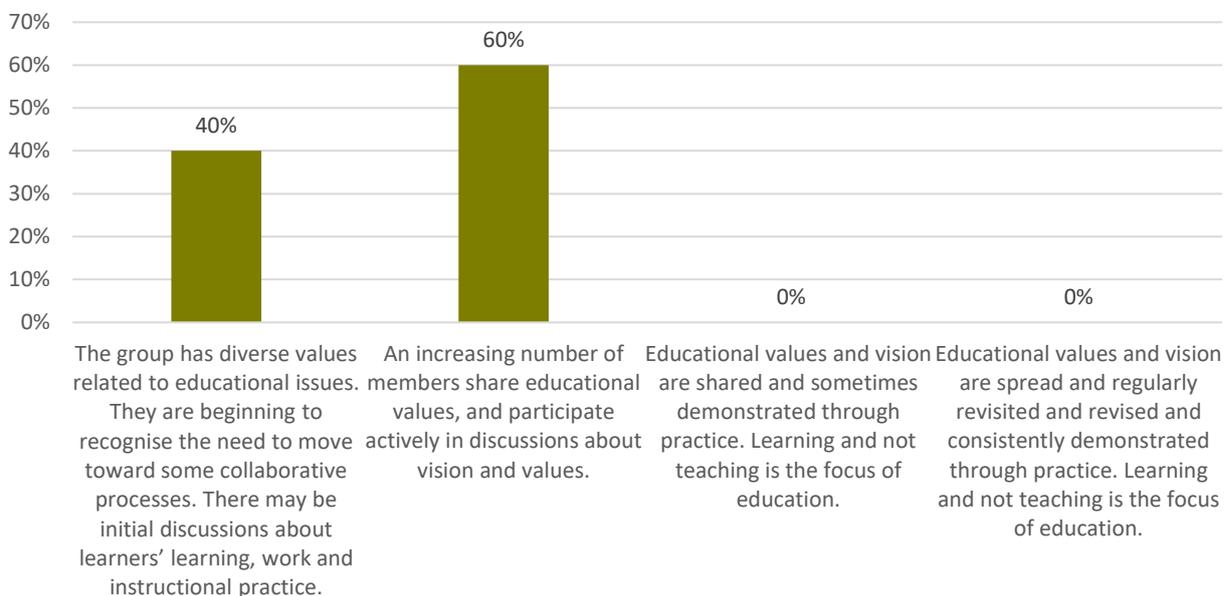
“We learn different teaching styles from each other, we are learning about each other, we are building a team.”  
 “We feel free, we develop team spirit amongst ourselves.” “When your learners are struggling we now know we can check with our colleagues for assistance.” (Thlolo FP)

In one PLC, not all members were contributing to the discussions and some remained silent. Some teachers felt that others were not contributing fully all the time because of different personalities.

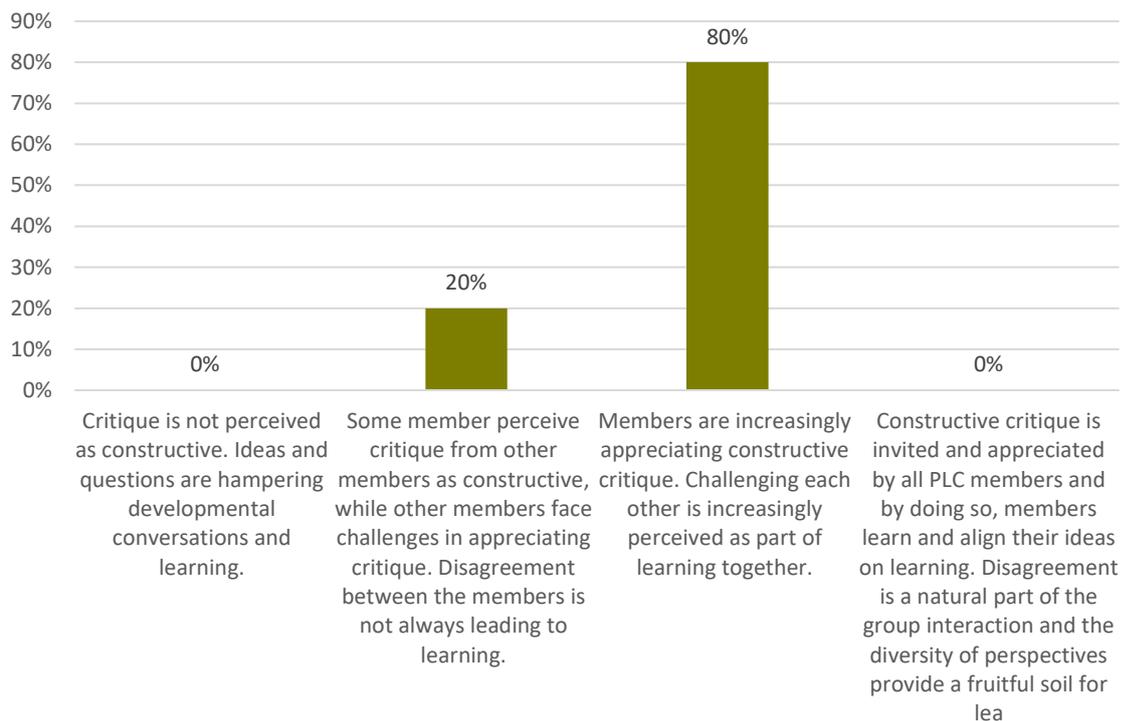
“We are different and sometimes some people do not share as easily as others.”

These PLC characteristics are closely related to the need for a shared vision, focus on learning for all learners and support challenge and constructive critique in a PLC.

### Shared vision and focus on learning for all learners



## Support challenge and constructive critique



By giving feedback on each other's lessons, PLC members share successes and shortcomings and explore what it means for their teaching in their classrooms. This reflective attitude and collaboration increases the confidence of teachers as they are all working towards the same objectives and **share the effort**.

"When we sat down and put all our ideas on the table in the PLC, we got more comfortable with each other. We were now concentrating on the work we were doing." (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

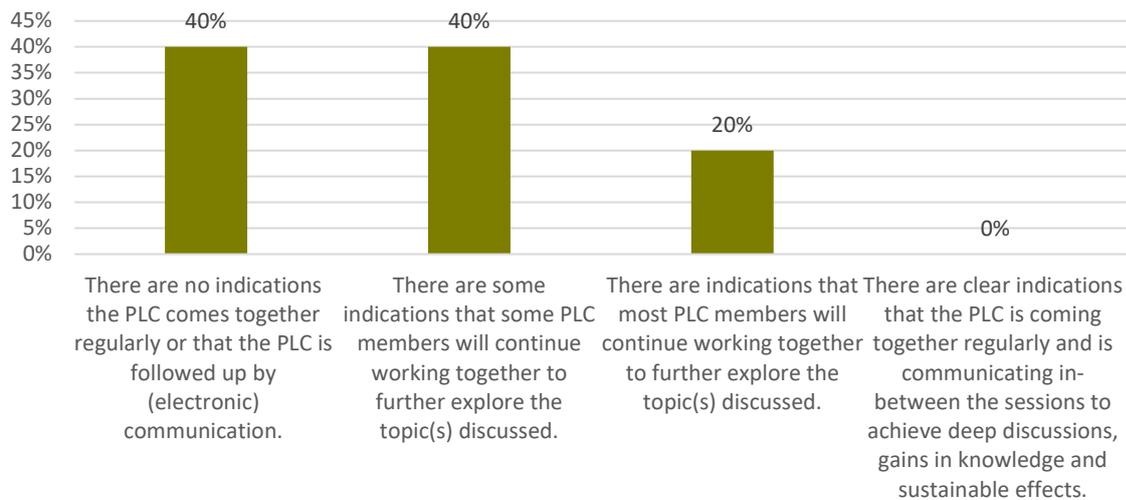
"When we share, the burden becomes better." (Pontsheng FP)

"If I don't know something or have challenges in class, I can come and share the challenge in the PLC." (Pontsheng IP)

"Even though we never met as a PLC due to time constraints, but as you have observed, we are free to openly criticise one another with the hope of providing our kids with quality education." (Thlolo IP)

In most observed sessions, members perceive critique as constructive. Members relate discussions to their own practice and have honest discussions. In one PLC session, some members didn't feel comfortable to express themselves.

### 3.7 Regularity



It is not yet clear from these second sessions if the PLCs will continue beyond the lesson study cycle. It is likely that a core group of selected PLCs members might continue the sessions. As discussed above, this is more likely for the members of FP PLCs. The members are so highly engrossed in their discussions that they seem to continue these discussions even outside the mentored lesson study sessions.

“We think we could continue on our own even after Ria has gone.” “We will see after the fourth session whether there were enough sessions. We have not had a dropout from our group.” (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

The biggest challenge is the **timing** of the PLC. As teachers are still quite new to the PLC concept, it takes time to prepare and engage in the sessions.

“We are still at the starting stage. Maybe when we get more experience, we can do more in a short time.” (Dibeng sa Tsebo FP)

“The time is not enough and we are already tired after teaching. Maybe we could have more time during school time and then we could replace it later.” (Pontsheng FP)

“The lesson study is good but we have no time to do it properly.” “We are marking exam scripts so the time is very limited to do the work preparing for the lesson study.” (Thlolo FP)

“Because of time constraints our colleagues are not prepared to join the PLC. The challenge that we have that is a stumbling block is time allocated for PLC meetings.” (Thlolo IP)

## 4. Conclusion

The PLC characteristics defined in the DBE guideline on PLCs provide a framework of assumptions of well-functioning PLCs. The data collected from the lesson study PLCs in Motheo district in Free State, help to understand how PLCs function as a method for continuing professional development and how their effectiveness could be improved.

A safe environment where all PLC members know and trust each other is an indicator for the quality of the discussions in a PLC. This is confirmed by Stoll et al. (2006, p.239) who states that “teachers are unlikely to participate in classroom observation and feedback, mentoring partnerships, discussion about pedagogical issues, curriculum innovation, unless they feel safe”. Opening your classroom practice can come with anxiety, unless you trust your colleagues. The role of an external facilitator is delicate in that regard. On the one hand, an external facilitator might hamper the trust and safe environment in a PLC, because he or she can be perceived as an intruder in that environment. But the external facilitator was also a key motivator for the PLCs in this study. The role of the external facilitator was to enrich the discussions and increase the relevance of the PLCs by bringing what is learned into practice. Research from Murphy (2015) confirms this observation by stating that the presence of formal leaders in the creation of learning communities is paramount.

This brings us to leadership. In the observed PLC sessions, an external facilitator was taking up the leadership role of the PLC. But some PLCs gave indications of distributed leadership, where different members were taking up leadership functions such as leading the discussions, timekeeping and recording the exchanges. This is an important step to ensure the sustainability of the PLC beyond the presence of the external facilitator. In some observed PLC sessions, instructional leadership and support from management for the PLCs was present, but in other PLCs this was absent. The role of leadership should be supportive and developmental rather than focusing on accountability as a result of provincial or national policies. School leadership can nurture PLCs and provide the necessary resources, but should not impose PLC structures in the school. “Accountability imposed from outside a PLC – usually stemming from a top-down, albeit worthy initiative – does not lead to the most effective PLCs” (Brown Easton, 2016, p. 44).



PLCs are a method of collective learning where participants determine their own professional development. In most PLCs, participants acknowledged that by sharing the effort, they become better teachers. Teachers learn teaching strategies from each other and test out what works best in their class. In the lesson study PLCs, an experiential teaching strategy was introduced by giving practical examples for problem solving. This teaching strategy helped participants to improve the quality of their teaching so that their learners would understand the topic better. Constructive critique is increasingly appreciated by the PLC members and challenging each other is perceived as part of learning together. This relates closely to the need for a safe and trustful environment amongst PLC members. When you trust your co-worker, you will more easily accept feedback and learn from each other.

Although peer learning is the focus of a PLC, external support was required in the observed PLCs to bring in alternative viewpoints. The PLCs were mostly closed groups, with a fixed number of teachers, but they acknowledge that by bringing in external visitors, the quality of their

discussions will improve. This is a role that could be taken up by HoDs or district officials like subject advisors.

The type of activity engaged in in these PLCs increased the applicability of what was learned in practice. Lesson study focuses on real lesson preparations, implementations and observations, increasing the relevance of the PLCs. The outcomes of the PLCs relate closely to the daily practice of the teachers. This makes the PLC method more responsive to changes in practices compared to other forms of professional development, like workshops or trainings.

The sustainability of the PLC sessions highly depends on the characteristics discussed above. But most importantly, the benefits as perceived by the PLC members must outweigh the time invested in the PLCs. Clear communication about the benefits of a PLC could help in this regard: “We needed more info on the PLC before others were told they could leave if they wanted. I think some left the PLC because they did not fully understand how they could benefit from it or what it really was about.” (Thlolo FP)

## 5. Recommendations for data collection tools

From the implementation of the data collection tools, it is recommended to make the following changes to the PLC observation rubric:

- To combine the benchmarks of the characteristics on collaborative and reflective enquiry and collective responsibility for student learning;
- To combine the benchmarks of the characteristics on systematic, rigorous enquiry into practice and coherent, responsive change in practice;
- To review the benchmarks for the characteristic on shared vision to align better with the stages for development.

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