

National Report Cyprus

1.1. National Context of Education in relation to PLCs & internship

In Cyprus, Teachers' Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a relatively new endeavour. They are currently being organized by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institution, although schools may voluntarily get engaged in PLCs on their own. Only a few schools participate on this at the present, and support is being provided to the schools by visits from the Cyprus Pedagogical Institution on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. Hence, the idea is not widely known or the method applied, and schools usually lack important knowledge about how to organize, run and sustain learning communities. Also, teachers or school heads do not have the needed training for tools and ways to support PLCs in their schools.

Student teachers in Cyprus spend about 3 months of their 4th year of studies in school as part of their internship (school-practicum). Although they get to be placed into schools during their 2nd and 3rd year of studies also, their main internship is at their last year of their studies. Schools are being appointed by the Ministry of Education for each university, and universities place their student teachers. During the internship, student teachers teach an increasing number of lessons, until they take on for a period of 2 weeks the total responsibility of teaching in the classroom.

Due to the fact that the school-based teacher PLCs are not well established in Cyprus, and due to the fact that student teachers spend a small amount of continuing time in schools, they are usually not included either in teacher PLCs at the schools they get placed or even at the regular school meetings.

In terms of their internships, student teachers are present at schools in three phases. Particularly:

- During the first phase of student teaching experience, the student teachers go in real classrooms in pairs and they have the opportunity to discuss their experience. Furthermore, they organize educational activities together (co-teaching).
- During the second phase of the student teaching experience, the student teachers have the opportunity to observe a narration of one of their classmates and give them feedback following certain guidelines.
- During all the phases of the students teaching experience the teacher trainer carries out a number of observations of the student teachers teaching with the main goal to give him/her feedback on their teaching.

1.2. Methods

We asked

- Student Teachers (n=16)
- Mentors (n=3)
- Head Teachers (n=3)
- Teacher Trainers/University Professors (n=2)
- Stakeholders (n=4)

For the focus groups we followed the common questionnaire in which there are questions for each of the above groups (see Appendix 1).

1.2.1. Student teachers

We collected data from 16 pre-primary student teachers. They were all in the third year of their studies (BA in Early Childhood Education at the European University Cyprus) and attend the second phase of their internship. They were asked to fill out an online questionnaire, which included open-ended questions. The questionnaire was completed by the students during the 11th week of the semester.

1.2.2. Mentors & Heads

3 mentors and 3 heads were interviewed in a focus group format. Everyone had been working with the EUC for several years and hosting students in their classrooms for their internship. When we invited them to join the focus group, they were all very positive. During the focus group they were all having the opportunity to express freely their thoughts and discuss about things that concern them.

1.2.3. Teacher Trainers

Two teacher trainers (one for primary and one for early childhood education) were interviewed in a focus group format. The teacher trainers came from two different universities (a public and a private university) and have more than 10 years' experience in advising student teachers in their internship phases.

1.3. Current status of learning opportunities for student teachers (university phases/internship phases) in the contexts of PLCs

1.3.1. Concepts of cooperation, learning communities etc.

From the perspective of student teachers

For student teachers, cooperation means the mutual assistance between two or more people in achieving a common goal. It also includes support and interaction between them. During a cooperation people exchange views, solve questions, find solutions and through them they socialized and acquire various skills. They also mentioned that cooperation is something we start to build from our childhood (kindergarten) and is a key skill that is important to develop in a community. Student teachers also referred to different characteristics and to the different levels that a collaboration can be achieved.

People who work together need to:

- speak comfortably to each other
- have communication
- have respect and understanding
- be all active
- to be treated equally
- be open to each other's views

Levels of cooperation can be distinguished on three levels:

Groups with peers: a group of fellow students that meet for a task that needs to be completed for the needs of a course, to share things, to exchange views, solve queries, and find a solution commonly.

In a classroom with student teachers: students-teachers express their ideas to each other, share material, and help each other on aspects that they find difficult to understand.

Cooperation of students with an academic approach (in the context of a lesson): where the lecturer answers to students' questions, helping them to find solutions to problems, is available

to discuss with them during his/her office hour or he/she communicates with them via email. He/she also discusses things that the students are concerned about.

For example, student teachers refer for the concept of cooperation:

“Personally, I see cooperation as a process where people share their ideas and try to come up with something in common.”

“By cooperating you become better and with others you can achieve better results.”

“Through cooperation we can work better and have better results than when we work individually.”

All student teachers reported that they had never heard the idea of a “learning community”. However, they imagined that learning communities may consist of a group of people (e.g., teachers) who work together for a common purpose. They believed that people who participate in learning communities have common interests, goals, needs, and work together for the common benefit (e.g. knowledge on a topic). To achieve their goals there must be respect for each other and no competition, they have to communicate effectively, have mutual trust, and everyone engages into the community with the ultimate aim to achieve the common goal.

For example, student teachers state:

“The learning community is a group of people who come together to exchange views on a topic.”

“Learning communities are groups of people who have a common goal. These people collaborate, communicate and collect information in order to achieve their goal.”

“These groups may consist of teachers who collaborate and exchange ideas to design a common lesson with the ultimate goal of better learning for children.”

From the perspective of mentors & heads

For mentors and heads cooperating with student teachers means informing them about issues related to managing their classroom, participate and help them in all activities that take place during the school period (e.g., organized activities with parents, in school breaks watching together what happens with their students, preparation of school celebrations etc). They also mentioned that as part of their cooperation, they help student teachers to plan and design activities for teaching.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

For teacher trainers cooperation includes group meetings with student teachers, meetings with supervisor from the university program and experts, and communication with involved adults (heads/mentors) on a regular basis.

From the perspective of stakeholders

Stakeholders from the Ministry of Education and Culture in Cyprus suggested that new issues, problems, and status quo in schools create a number of important needs that should be addressed in order to identify solutions they can contribute. These needs are related to school’s daily business, they take a lot of teaching and administrative time and schools will appreciate help from academics in this enterprise. They also suggested that for this culture to become established, it is important that it happens within the context of teacher PLCs. In this context they will use the teaching work and the collaboration between various teachers and academics in order to use research to solve everyday problems. The presence of the student teachers in their schools could be a way to organize collaboration between universities and

schools by running PLCs. However, they do not seem to think that PLC could be an important asset for student teachers in their starting career as a teacher.

1.3.2. What is being practiced in which levels (university, schools etc)

From the perspective of student teachers

Student teachers mentioned that they had been part of various work groups, due to the requirements of the undergraduate courses they attend. Through this they had the opportunity to work together and collaborate with their fellow students. They mentioned that usually:

- the group consists of 3-4 people
- there is a person who coordinates the team, divides the tasks and is responsible for the final form and delivery of the task
- they usually work in the university library or some other quiet place where they can work and discuss
- there is interaction from all members of the group
- joint decisions are taken

They also reported that their involvement in these groups helps them to develop:

- communication skills
- stress management skills
- organization skills

In addition to these issues they also discussed other topics like personal questions or issues related to their future profession.

Student teachers mentioned that they were also members of learning communities in the part of their school experience (internship), as they collaborated, discussed and exchanged material with other fellow students both for preparation and after the implementation of their teaching. They reported that in these learning communities, both the classroom teacher (mentor) and the teacher trainer were included. However, the cooperation / communication they had with these three groups of people did not happen at the same time (they met/discussed at different times with their fellow students, and at a different time with their mentor and at a different time with the teacher trainer).

From the perspective of mentors & heads

They reported that the cooperation usually takes place between the mentor and the student teacher during the time at school. However, student teachers do not attend the weekly staff sessions at the school (these are attended by the teachers of the school and the teacher head after the end of the school program). Though, for issues related to students in their class are thoroughly informed by their mentor.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

Teacher trainers suggested that they meet the principles of the early childhood settings in order to explain the philosophy of the student teaching experience program and inform them about the course requirements. They also mentioned that during the first phase of student teaching experience, the student teachers go in real classrooms in pairs and they have the opportunity to discuss their experience. Furthermore, they organize educational activities together (co-teaching). During the second phase of the student teaching experience, the student teachers have the opportunity to observe a narration of one of their classmates and give them feedback following certain guidelines. During all the phases of the students

teaching experience the teacher trainer makes several observations of the student teachers with the main goal of feedback.

From the perspective of stakeholders

Stakeholders suggested that although there is something going on in terms of learning communities in schools, there is not a standard practice to involve student teachers in school-based learning communities.

1.3.3. Benefits they see

From the perspective of student teachers

Student teachers believed that through their involvement in a learning community, they can achieve a common goal through the exchange of views, creative conflicts, ideas, collaboration and understanding of different perspectives. They learn to coexist as a community regardless of each other's differences, to respect and to support each other so that they can gain from each other (e.g. from others' experiences, knowledge and skills). In addition, they acquire knowledge and skills that will help them meet various challenges in their later career.

In summary, student teachers considered the benefits of participating in learning communities to be multiple. Some of them are:

- Development of cooperation skills
- development in both cognitive and social fields
- exchange of learning material
- mutual help
- respect for colleagues
- acquisition of knowledge (depending on the topic of the learning community)
- communication skills
- socialization

For example, student teachers referred to the benefits they see from their participation in learning communities:

“Acquiring knowledge and skills along the way as members of a learning community.”

“Achieving a common goal through constructive cooperation.”

“I find it important to be part of a learning community, because, in addition to developing as a person, I can acquire new knowledge, learn how to work with other people, listen to their opinions and respect them.”

From the perspective of mentors & heads

Mentors and teacher heads reported that both student teachers and themselves have a lot to gain from their cooperation. Student teachers have the opportunity to gain good examples and experiences from good classroom management practices, interact with the school community (not just their mentor but the whole school environment), be informed of the rules of operation of the schools, learn to organize and prepare their teaching and gain experiences from teaching in real classes (from theory to practice = realism). On the other hand, teachers also gain from hosting student teachers in their classrooms. They learn about innovative methods and practices (which are linked to the new curriculum) and the implementation of new materials through the teachings of the student teachers.

“From our interaction with students we have many benefits, both we and them.”

“Through student teachers teaching we can see some kind of innovation in methods, approaches, practices based on the new curriculum. We read the new curriculum and we know it, but the student teachers are closer to it, so we would like to see it in practice.”

From the perspective of teacher trainers

The student teachers use the feedback of the teacher trainer to improve their skills (communication, organization, management, differentiation) as well to design and implement quality educational activities.

From the perspective of stakeholders

No data collection for this aspect.

1.3.4. Obstacles/difficulties they see/encounter

From the perspective of student teachers

Student teachers reported that their group-work groups they are part of should not exceed 4 people, because when that happens, not everyone has the space and the time to express their views. Also, there should be no competition between the team members, democratic processes should prevail, communication, dialogue and mutual support among group members and everyone working towards the common goal they set.

From the perspective of mentors & heads

Mentors and heads mentioned that there are some obstacles that come from having student teachers in their classrooms. Mainly they referred to time management problems (e.g., lack of time to help students to plan their future lessons, but also to feedback/discuss lessons that they already did, teacher trainers' visits to their classrooms often change their schedule). They also reported that the presence of students in their classroom (especially in the first few weeks) often causes disruption to students (classroom management problems). Another obstacle that the mentors and heads face is the different perspectives that the school may have (on various subjects) with respect to the university from which the student teachers come.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

Limited time of the teacher trainer and willingness of the student teachers to use the teacher's trainer time (to make the most of), sometimes there are difficulties in cooperation between the student teachers.

From the perspective of stakeholders

Stakeholders suggested that there is also a lack of focus on teaching effectiveness in the school culture (of reflection, school-based professional learning communities etc)– even for defying that effectiveness from a teacher's perspective. Teachers, schools and the school system need to establish acceptable definitions of teaching effectiveness and develop a culture of reflection that seeks to investigate and promote teaching effectiveness in schools. They think, that this would be an interesting subject for PLC for the student teachers as well, and they could be involved in PLCs at their placement schools in investigations, discussions and learning about this.

1.3.5. What are the requirements to improve their learning opportunities in PLCs

From the perspective of student teachers

No data collection for this aspect.

From the perspective of mentors & heads

They reported that they would like their school to have better cooperation with the university where the students come from, in terms of applying new teaching methods. Also they consider that their participation in programs/workshops/seminars will promote and improve this cooperation (with university and student teachers).

From the perspective of teacher trainers

Teacher trainers indicated that they need specific time during the student teaching program where student teachers, teacher trainer, university instructors of each domain, heads and mentors meet throughout the semester. Furthermore, it needs to exist better cooperation with the mentors by having more time to discuss the student teachers' daily lesson plans.

From the perspective of stakeholders

Stakeholders suggested that here is a need for support by academics on organizing and supporting school-based sustained professional learning in schools. Promoting and circulating a research culture among teachers needs to start from developing a school-based culture in which teachers are expected to reflect, doing research as well accessing and using research for their daily work and practices. In order for this culture to be sustained, it needs to be developed within schools (not just academics sharing their research), based on their teaching, school and student needs, and teachers should be active researchers.

In that, they suggested that another possibility could be to engage student teachers at their placement schools in PLCs that will deal with investigating own daily practice in relation to productive teaching. This could also support teachers at the school, who are not related to university-based research, help the school learn from both student teachers and academics about new ways of classroom-based research about teaching, teacher own practices and learning, and develop towards that area.

Stakeholders further suggested that we need to grasp opportunities that provide affordances for collaboration between the student teachers, academics and the teachers. For example, the case of the new policy of the evaluation of students in Cyprus, that has been announced in September 2019, is an opportunity for this. It is not clear how this policy will be implemented and in what ways. A teacher-academic collaboration in a school-based setting will help in this and create collaborations for research, and promote the development of this school-based teacher-as-a researcher culture.

Stakeholders also noted that collaboration of teachers with academics needs to extend beyond teaching practices, to include sociological, sociocultural, classroom organization, student behaviour and other issues that are related to everyday school business. Maybe, the involvement of student teachers to schools' learning communities could be a way forward.

1.4. Summary and Overall Discussion

During their teacher education program, student teachers have opportunities to work in groups and to collaborate with their fellow students. This is usually done for working on assignments and tasks in groups both in the context of their undergraduate courses and in the context of their school internship. They recognized the benefits they have through this cooperation (e.g. acquiring knowledge and skills) and although they reported some difficulties in these collaborations, they have mostly positive experiences. However, there is an apparent lack of student teachers' professional development in terms of PLCs. At the same time both mentors and head teachers felt that a collaboration of student teachers and their

mentors can be fruitful for both sides. For example student teachers have the opportunity to gain good examples and experiences from good classroom management practices and teachers learn about innovative methods and practices that student teachers bring to their classes. Stakeholders do not seem to think that PLCs could be an important asset for student teachers in their starting career as a teachers. On the other hand suggested that there is a need for support by academics on organizing and supporting school-based sustained professional learning in schools. However they believe that the presence of student teachers in schools and their involvement to schools' learning communities can be a way to facilitate the collaboration between universities and schools by running PLCs.

1.5. Implications and Suggestions

Student teachers' groupwork mainly related to assignments and tasks that need to be carried out for the purposes of their undergraduate lessons. Even though student teachers acknowledge the benefits from their participation in collaborative groups, they don't have the opportunity to get involved in concepts like PLCs which are promote their professional learning and development. Additionally, due to the non-wide participation of the teachers (in their placement schools) in PLCs, student teachers lack of knowledge and experience for this concept. However, their knowledge, skills and positive experiences from the collaborative groups that they participate exist an important resource for their participation in such concepts (PLCs). Therefore, there is a great need for providing ideas, structures and opportunities to student teachers (through their university courses), as well as knowledge-how for their mentors and their teacher trainers in order to create and involved in PLCs. The creation of such a culture among student teachers will help them to become reflective learners and to grow professional during their studies.

1.6. Appendix 1. Guideline for Questions for the focus group interviews

Ask student-teachers

1. Have you heard the idea of "learning community"? What do you understand by/How do you understand the concept "Learning community"?
2. Are you working in any student group? Who organizes it, what is the structure, what do you do in it, in which form is the most helpful for your learning, what content is better and where do you meet, what topics?
3. How do you understand the concept "Cooperation"?
4. What are the (possible) outcomes from the learning communities you are part of?
5. What kind of learning communities are you part of, and why are you part of them (what is the motivation to join the community)?
6. What is the role of the learning communities in your professional development as a teacher?
7. How are you invited into the school collaboration/communication? How, in what ways? What is going on in these talks? Using data? Reflection? Theory talk?
8. What role do your teaching supervisor have in your professional teacher development?
9. How would a "perfect learning community" look like? How could you attend in a learning community to the best for your own and the others learning?
10. What is the importance of having the competence to cooperate/ participate in a learning community for your lifelong learning as a teacher?

Ask mentors in schools

1. What is your perspective on students coming for internship, what can student teachers learn from you, what about learning with your student-teachers within a school-based community?
2. What can you learn from your student-teachers? What do they bring to the school that is useful for you?
3. What about the idea of a school-based community that involves teachers and student-teachers?
4. What is the impact of a student-teacher in your classrooms/school?
5. Do you include student-teachers to the school collaboration/communication? How, in what ways? What is going on in these talks? Using data? Reflection? Theory talk?
6. Do student-teachers have a role in the professional development in your school? Yes, no, why, how?

Ask head-teachers/heads and other teachers

1. What is the cooperation at you school like, where and how does your staff learn? How are you part of it? Are there learning community activities you are involved in?
2. When you have you students in internship how are they integrated, what role do they play...? Examples of collaborative learning?

Ask teacher trainers within the University context

1. What concepts do you know for reform oriented collaboration at school and what are convincing arguments to adapt those ideas at university? In which relationship to daily school live?
2. In the preparation of your student-teachers do you include activities for student-teachers to learn to learn from each other?
3. In what ways do you support your professionalization of your student according to collaboration and cooperative learning
4. Experiences, obstacles, chances, needs, university structures, Context, curriculum...?

Ask stakeholders (inspectors, education directors, researchers)

1. What idea of collaboration at school do you have, how do you support it (action and policies) or ask people in to support it (researchers etc.)?
2. How do internship students match that picture?