National Report Spain

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

Although a number of teacher development initiatives are being currently implemented, both encouraged and recognised by the different educational authorities and also promoted within individual schools which have some common elements with the notion of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), PLCs are not a widespread teacher development modality in Spain (Barrios et al., 2020). In fact, leaving aside those who participated in the Erasmus+ HeadsUP project, neither the students nor the teachers/headteachers who have been questioned in order to elaborate this national report had ever heard about this concept.

Internship in the Primary Education Bachelor's Degree is a compulsory module, although the number of credit points may vary depending on the university; as an example, 44 credit points need to be completed by the students at the University of Málaga. These are completed in the last three years of the four-year course, starting from a three-week (mainly observation) school placement in the second year, followed by a four-week placement in the third year, where student teachers act as assistant teachers in the classroom and, finally, a whole semester (15-week) placement in the last year, where they still act as assistant teachers and they also assume (part-time) fully autonomous teaching for a period of 2-3 weeks, although they are always guided and accompanied by the class or the specific subject tutor. Students are also simultaneously mentored by a university teacher and periodical meetings or seminars are held at university during the school placement period. Student need to complete a portfolio where they collect information about the practicum context and the activities they carry out at the school, and analyse and reflect on these experiences and on their professional development.

Internship in the one-year compulsory Master's Degree Course to become a secondary school teacher takes up 100 hours distributed throughout 5 months in which the course combines modules at the university (3 days a week) and school placement (2 days), and then a 3-week period in which students spend 5 days a weeks at the school. As explained below, in the present national report we have focused mainly on primary education as secondary student teachers are just starting their school placement and they have not yet had enough experience at their placements to be able to answer about some of the issues we are interested in.

Students are sent for their internships to the public and private state-funded schools that volunteer to receive student teachers. No selection procedure whatsoever takes place. Within the school, any teacher -irrespective of experience or any other consideration- can volunteer to mentor/tutor a student teacher. No special requirement is demanded. The students select the school they want to do their internship in – they list several school in priority order and students with a higher overall average grade are given priority over those with a lower one. Once a is assigned to a school the headteacher decides which specific tutor will mentor her/him among the teachers who previously volunteered to do so.

An agreement is signed every four years approximately between the local education authority and the Faculty of Education in each Andalusian province (as education is decentralised and each autonomous community takes responsibility for the education within its territory this may vary from community to community). In this agreement the conditions are established for the collaboration of state-funded schools in the preparation of teachers. However, this agreement is a rather open framework and individual schools have the last word in deciding how exactly student teachers participate in school life during their internship, which activities and teachers' meetings they will join, whether they will attend meetings with individual parents, etc.

1.2. Methods

We asked

- Student Teachers (*n* = 15)
- Mentors (*n* = 7)
- Heads (*n* = 6)
- Teacher Trainers/University Professors (*n* = 5)

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

> Note: The perspectives of other stakeholders that were contacted could not be obtained due to agenda reasons at a time when the majority of the staff in key positions in the local education authority were new in office and appointments were getting delayed beyond our IO1 contribution deadline.

1.2.1. Student Teachers

Student teachers were asked both in a group interview format and also through a questionnaire; they were all in the fourth and last year of the Primary Education Bachelor's Degree from the University of Málaga and, more precisely, in their last internship period (this period lasts 15 weeks). Both the interview and the completion of the questionnaire took place in the fifth week of that period.

1.2.2. Mentors

Data from mentors were obtained -one was interviewed and the rest completed an online questionnaire; they were all primary school teachers with varying experience in mentoring student teachers. Among their reasons to apply to become mentors of student teachers were the willingness to contribute to teacher preparation but also their expectation to have an assistant teacher in the classroom and get the compensation -merit that can contribute towards them changing school or obtaining a pay rise every six years-.

1.2.3. Heads

Four primary and two secondary headteachers whose schools receive student teachers each year took part in a focus group interview. They had all participated in the HeadsUP Erasmus+ project and were very appreciative of the contribution of the student teachers to their respective schools.

1.2.4. Teacher trainers

University teacher trainers of both primary and secondary student teachers were interviewed in a focus group format; they all had more than 10 years' experience in mentoring student teachers from the Faculty of Education. Two of the teacher trainers were also in-service teacher trainers – teacher development of in-service teachers depends exclusively on the regional education authority and the University takes no responsibility in this matter whatsoever.

1.3. Current status of learning opportunities for student-teachers in the contexts of PLCs

1.3.1. Concepts of cooperation, learning communities etc.

From the perspective of student-teachers

The overall concept of cooperation that emerges from the students' answers is one in which groupwork is carried out in order to accomplish an academic assignment. The format in which

such assignment has to be completed -a group assignment- is imposed by the teacher. The overall idea, however, is that they work in groups because they have to – not because they choose to do so. In this respect, no mention to study groups or any other type of voluntary collaboration is made in their responses apart from the compulsory groupwork assignments.

From the perspective of mentors

A clear difference exists in the perspectives voiced by the mentor who participated in the HeadsUP project and the other mentors. The mentor who had participated in the HeadsUP project, the idea of 'learning together' in a professional setting was much more elaborated and more in the line with the notion of PLC, she was open to deprivatised practice and aware of the need to reflect on and elaborate teaching sequences together. For the other teachers, the idea of collaboration was associated with preparing materials together or sharing good practices without the far-reaching implications of sharing values and a mission, or engaging in reflective collective discussion.

> *We are involved in an innovation project together with the university focused on lesson studies; as a group we have grown in how we perceive our teaching -open to others, subject to revision and evaluation- and how we reflect on teaching and on ourselves as teachers.*

> *We collaborate when we plan activities together for the school or the class.*

> *Working together at schools is necessary because some documents and activities have to be agreed upon.*

From the perspective of heads

The perspective on collaboration and collective development of the interviewed heads is very much in line with the notion of Professional Learning Communities as their participation in the HeadsUP project had deeply influenced their perspectives on school development through collaborative reflective practice. Two of them were participating themselves in heads PLCs and the four of them were fostering different types of teacher groups in their schools which shared some features with teachers' PLCs. However, heads in Spain do not hire their staff and they recognise that some teacher groups in their schools were really effective whereas some others worked together at a more administrative level.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

All the teacher trainers interviewed had been in contact with the HeadsUP project and also influenced by the ideas underlying PLCs. They all seemed convinced that developing professionally together in a group of teachers takes much more than mere collaboration or cooperation among teachers and that a culture of reflection and permanent evaluation and revision of practices is essential. Teacher trainers also expressed their concern about how the students can get experiences in such groups during their internship periods.

1.3.2.   <u>What is being practiced in which levels (university, schools etc.)</u>

From the perspective of student-teachers

According to the students, their university course provides ample opportunities for groupwork and collaboration as many of the set assignments have to be carried out in groups. However, as mentioned above, the students understand working together as groupwork aimed at completing set tasks established by the programme. However, the idea of collectively developing as teachers within those groups was never referred to. When it comes to schools, student teachers are invited to some teachers' meetings -the head decides which meetings they are allowed in. When asked about the issues which are discussed in the teachers' meetings they have attended, the topics they mentioned were rather superficial and connected to the day-to-

day functioning of the school rather than to those related to students' learning. Additionally, the student teachers never mentioned in their answers that they witnessed teachers making references to theory or research-based evidence in those meetings to solve a problem or guide their teaching practice.

From the perspective of mentors

Mentors mentioned the compulsory meetings (year meetings, cycle -primary education is divided into three two-year cycles- meetings, evaluation meetings, etc.) as moments in which teachers work together. However, they do not seem to conceive those moments as teacher development opportunities but as tasks they necessarily need to accomplish together. The mentor who took part in the HeadsUP project, however, works with colleagues participating in an innovation project that involves extra meetings where study lessons are prepared; in this innovation project student teachers have a very active and determinant role as they are invited to bring in ideas, suggest procedures, prepare materials and horizontally collaborate and reflect with the practising teachers in the lesson studies.

From the perspective of heads

All heads (and also mentors) refer to teachers' compulsory meetings as established moments where teachers need to collaborate in a variety of tasks such as planning or analysis of students' performance data. They are recognised as spaces where reflection could be exercised and collaborative professional learning could take place. However, they acknowledged that the quality of reflection very much depends on the groups of teachers themselves, with some groups being much more development-oriented than others. As to the opportunities provided to student teachers who do their internship at their schools, they were all in favour of opening their meetings to them, and they recognised their contribution to the schools in terms of enthusiasm, new and innovative approaches, and extra help. They even recognised that their views on the school and their perspectives on areas of improvement are relevant information that could be used to as part of the information that is gathered to evaluate the school every year. One of the heads was even starting a PLC group among the student teachers at her school with the collaboration of university teachers.

Heads also highlighted that, as according to the Faculty of Education Guidelines, student teachers only have the obligation to attend the school activities in the mornings, they miss the opportunity to attend those compulsory teachers' meetings that take place in the afternoons/evenings, from which they are convinced the future teachers could potentially benefit greatly.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

The teacher trainers interviewed meet regularly -approximately every fortnight- with the student teachers they tutor from the university. They mentioned that they tried to promote collaborative learning in these seminars and through tasks such as the joint design of learning activities, the reading and commenting of other students' diary entries or activities in which student teachers need to interact with teachers at the school and discuss professional issues. Some of the teacher trainers mentioned the lack of chances their students have to reflect and interact with teachers in their regular meetings during their internship.

1.3.3. Benefits they see

From the perspective of student-teachers

The majority of the surveyed students seemed to be very appreciative of groupwork as a way of learning from each other, benefitting from approaching issues from perspectives new to them and having the opportunity to interact and socialize with peers. There were some students,

however, who seemed to have a more utilitarian than development-oriented view of groupwork and interpreted it as a way of distributing and sharing the different tasks of the assignment and did not (explicitly) recognise any kind of professional learning while being involved in groupwork or collaborative tasks.

Groupwork allows us to learn from each other

Even when groupwork is imposed by the teachers, I still find it one of the best ways of learning from each other

I learn group the different perspectives that my group members bring to the topic

Sometimes ways of tackling issues that had never occurred to me dawns on me during groups discussions

We learn to relate to other people while discussing on issues connected with teaching

We learn how to negotiate in order to achieve a common goal

We share the tasks and distribute the roles – it would be too big a burden to do some assignment individually.

From the perspective of mentors

The mentors interviewed held a very positive attitude towards the idea of student and practising teachers professionally learning together. One of them also highlighted the fact that she feels exposed in class when having student teachers in her class and that makes her want to further improve and adopt a humbled attitude since she was aware that they were bound to identify areas of improvement in her teaching. Her learning from the experience includes a conference with her student teachers at the end of the internship where she asks them to provide her with feedback about her teaching.

Both student teachers and us benefit from mutual learning. Student teachers can provide new ideas and methodologies and we contribute with our experience; we can also exchange our points of view on class matters.

In our innovation project the student teachers play a key role in translating the theory and methods they learn at university to practice and real classrooms.

From the perspective of heads

All the teachers interviewed were very much aware of the benefits of the school teachers being involved in processes of collective thinking and developing. Heads agreed on the benefit that can result from having "outsiders" that can provide evaluative information on different aspects of the school that can then feed the evaluative report each school has to produce at the end of the school year. They recognised that the interaction with student teachers can bring new ideas and methodologies, and, therefore, help teachers keep abreast of new developments in education.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

Teacher trainers unanimously recognised the potential benefits that a school learning community could have in the student teachers as this could mean socialising them in a culture of permanent questioning and investigating one's teaching, and of collective professional development. By observing and taking part in a school learning community the student teachers could obtain first-hand experience of a modality of teacher development that has been proved to impact positively on student learning.

1.3.4. Obstacles/difficulties they see/encounter

From the perspective of student-teachers

Since the purpose of groupwork and collaboration is to complete a task, problems arise when a member does not take responsibility over his/her part of the work or does not meet deadlines, when someone tries to impose his/her ideas, or when conflict due to personal incompatibilities occur. These obstacles are, therefore, more connected with the effective management of a group or with affective issues rather than with difficulties related to professional learning within a group. It is also worth mentioning that some students referred to the fact that more problems arise when groups are formed by the teacher rather than organised by the students themselves.

> *... although there are some problems such as difficulties to find the time to meet or the unsatisfactory degree of involvement of some members...*

> *... problems in my groups have arisen because of personal conflicts mainly.*

> *If you are in a group that you have self-selected, groupwork tends to work out better as you work with like-minded people; however, more negative than positive things happen in the groupwork when groups are formed by the teacher.*

From the perspective of mentors

Support and feedback from expert teachers are widely recognized to be effective in promoting novice teachers' learning (Attard-Tonna et al., 2017). Most of the mentors mentioned the lack of time as the main obstacle to discuss extensively with the student-teachers about everyday class issues, which has also been highlighted by research (Mena et al., 2020). Some of them explained that the reason to have student teachers in their classroom is the need for extra help in the classroom in order to respond to special individual needs and children differences. They also mentioned that they tried to help the students in their learning process, although not in the context of PLCs, an unknown concept for those who has not been involved in HeadsUP, as we have already explained.

> *She [the teacher-student] has helped me a lot with an autistic student.*

> *In my class there are three very troublesome, disruptive children, and I need help. As the administration does not offer support, we need teacher-students.*

Some teachers recognised that the students played no role in the school professional development; one of them mentioned the following reason:

> *They do not contribute to the school or staff development because their main role is to provide help in the class.*

From the perspective of heads

Heads unanimously recognised that not every teacher should be a mentor, and that some specific training to become a mentor should be required. They agreed on the benefit that could result from having a Practicum school project with clear and well-established objectives and procedures. They also agreed that schools and teachers taking in student teachers should go through an accreditation process and be the ones that could exclusively have this role of training prospective teachers. At the moment, they said, even at the same school, it is possible to find significant differences among the teachers who act as mentors depending on personal and professional qualities. Generosity was mentioned as one of the characteristics of "good mentors", as mentors need to spend considerable time and effort in good, effective mentoring of student teacher for which they get no real compensation.

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The interviewed heads also mentioned the lack of established feedback mechanisms so that the schools could benefit from the views and evaluative comments that student teachers make about the school In this respect, they would like to have access to the reports/portfolio that students write after their internship.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

According to teacher trainers, a lower student-to-staff ratio would help lecturers to cultivate closer relationships with their students, provide more extensive, detailed and frequent feedback to student assignment during internship, and get involved in more interactive seminars and discussions.

Both mentors and teacher trainers complained about the difficulties to have real contact with each other and to agree on each other's roles concerning students' learning objectives.

> *I cannot visit the students during their internship. I have lectures at that time.*

> *Some mentors do not even read the cover letter we send to them.*

> Mentors do not really evaluate. We cannot trust their evaluation reports because everyone gets the highest mark. They do not give real feedback to the students.

1.3.5. What are the needs, what they would like to have in the future to improve their learning opportunities in PLCs

From the perspective of student-teachers

Although it must be said that students were not very explicit when referring to their needs in this respect -they did not seem to be aware of these needs- some important implications for training can be inferred from their statements. Students seem to need training in effective group management -including how to solve difficulties of a more relational and affective nature and how to tackle communication when problems within the group arise. Additionally, some students seem to need the necessary skills to work in a professional -rather than a personal environment- where groups are made up of members who are not friends or like-minded people.

From the perspective of mentors

From the point of view of mentors, these circumstances would facilitate and improve their role as mentors of student teachers:

- The role and associated work of the mentors with the student-teachers should be properly recognised.

- All the teachers interviewed were very much aware of the benefits of collaborative work, but the quality of the collaboration seemed to be somewhat limited to practical issues and not really professional.

- A closer relationship between mentors and teacher trainers/Faculty of Education was demanded.

It is somewhat striking that mentors never mentioned issues connected with their need for a formal preparation programme to become a mentor as one of their needs.

From the perspective of heads

According to the interviewed heads, teachers need to recognize that they need to change, be observed by others and be open their practice to scrutiny and evaluation. A culture of evaluation and collective learning is needed in schools. Since we live in an increasingly complex world, teachers need to constantly develop their professional knowledge.

From the perspective of teacher trainers

According to teacher trainers, there is a gap between pedagogical vision and practice that should be reduced. PLCs could be a good instrument to reduce it, but structures need to be changed and student teachers should be made aware of what professionalism mean.

> *Although professional aspirations and professional autonomy of teachers are often expressed, student teachers prefer focusing on practical, classroom issues rather than on reading, researching, reflecting, justifying their methodological options and discussing.*

> *Student teachers love to give opinions, but they seldom give the reasons that underlie these opinions.*

> *Some students cannot distinguish the information or facts that led them to their judgements.*

Research and inquiry skills were mentioned as necessary tools to help student teachers to become lifelong learners.

> *To became lifelong learners, student-teachers should be prepared to investigate their practice and be in contact with mentors and teacher-trainers who are lifelong learners.*

1.4. Summary and Overall Discussion

In terms of teacher education, the programmes at UMA offer opportunities for groupwork and collaboration, and students acknowledge the advantages of this type of work to learn from each other. However, their idea of collaboration is connected with groupwork assignments rather than professional development as teachers. Additionally, they seem to lack essential groupwork skills -regarding, e.g., communication, conflict solution and management of different personality profiles- to obtain the benefits of professional groupwork and to approach these types of tasks from a professional perspective. During their internship, they do not acquire experiences of teachers' collaboration focused on students' learning as part of the school culture. The participation of heads, mentors and teacher trainers in the Erasmus+ HeadsUP project focused on fostering leading and teaching competences through involvement in PLCs seem to have had a marked effect on how the view professional learning and the participation of student teachers in reflective and improvement initiatives at school.

1.5. Implications and Suggestions

Teacher education programmes, besides providing opportunities for groupwork, should equip students not only for collaborative and cooperative work, but for professional and developmentally enriching collective learning and reflection. Student teachers value the opportunities from learning from each other; however, they do not seem aware of the role of collective reflection in the learning of teaching, of the possibilities of reflection for the learning of teaching, and of how to foster this collective reflection within the group. Teacher educator courses should probably incorporate the concept of professional learning communities as a professional long-life development strategy in their programmes. Additionally, teacher educators should also model this type of development activity by participating in professional learning communities themselves.

In the interviews with mentors, teacher trainers and heads it became clear that a culture of evaluation and of professional learning community is still not widespread in our context. Some attempts are being made -for example, at the schools whose heads were interviewed for the present report, but this is not the general trend. Although some efforts are being made by the education authorities to promote such a climate of reflective and collaborative professional development at schools, further strategies seem to be needed for this to happen.

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1.7. 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?