



Relating school leadership to perceived professional learning community characteristics: A multilevel analysis



Bénédicte Vanblaere*, Geert Devos

Department of Educational Studies, Ghent University, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000, Ghent, Belgium

HIGHLIGHTS

- The role of leadership in promoting desirable components of PLCs is underexplored.
- We examined the distinct merits of instructional and transformational leadership.
- Analyses were run on self-reported data from experienced primary school teachers.
- Instructional leaders support deprivatized practice and reflective dialogue.
- Transformational leaders support reflective dialogue and collective responsibility.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of transformational and instructional school leadership in facilitating interpersonal professional learning community (PLC) characteristics (collective responsibility, deprivatized practice, and reflective dialogue). Survey data were collected in 48 Flemish (Belgian) primary schools from 495 experienced teachers. Multilevel analyses, when controlling for school characteristics, demonstrated that instructional leadership is related to perceived participation in deprivatized practice and participation in reflective dialogue. Transformational leadership matters for perceived participation in reflective dialogue but also for the presence of collective responsibility. These findings result in practical implications, based on the distinct merits of both leadership styles for interpersonal PLC characteristics.

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1. Introduction

There is an unprecedented international call for schools to be professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers take responsibility for achieving high quality student learning and where teachers are willing to learn from other colleagues through systematic collaboration in order to achieve this goal (DuFour, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). PLCs are a powerful tool in our changing and increasingly complex world, where the quality of education relies heavily on teachers continuously renewing their professional knowledge and skills throughout their entire career (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Alethea, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Furthermore, a vast amount of studies have demonstrated the

contribution of PLCs to teacher learning, improved classroom instruction, and higher student achievement (Borko, 2004; Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Vandenberghe & Kelchtermans, 2002). Hence, descriptions of what PLCs are and how schools function as PLCs, are abundant in the literature. As a result, PLC has become a buzz word over the last decades in both policy and research, making it a normative imperative towards schools (Cranston, 2009; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). It is here that a problematic gap arises between the expectations in the academic world and the reality of day-to-day practices in many schools. Studies have shown that wide variation exists between schools regarding PLCs (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996) and that it is not self-evident for teachers to work collaboratively in their school and break through the reigning idea of teachers as strictly autonomous professionals within their classrooms (Day & Sachs, 2004; Donaldson et al., 2008; OECD, 2014). Given the potential of PLCs, one must ask, how can teachers be stimulated to break through these barriers in order for schools to become strong PLCs?

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Benedicte.Vanblaere@UGent.be (B. Vanblaere), Geert.Devos@UGent.be (G. Devos).

Regarding the outcome variables, it is striking that the multidimensionality of PLCs has been widely recognized in literature (Bolam et al., 2005; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011b; Slegers, den Brok, Verbiest, Moolenaar, & Daly, 2013), but that very few studies have taken separate characteristics into account when studying potential facilitating factors. Given the general fuzziness around the concept of PLCs, this results in considerable conceptual confusion about what is under examination and makes it difficult to draw clear conclusions or unambiguously interpret results (Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015). We believe that breaking down this concept into clear and identifiable characteristics largely increases the usefulness of the study for practice and theory because it provides information about how specific elements of PLCs can be encouraged. We address this lacuna by studying experienced teachers' perceptions of several interpersonal PLC characteristics as separate outcome variables. Our conception of the interpersonal PLC characteristics contains both behavioural and normative features (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999), as shown below in Fig. 1. We make a distinction between both, respectively studying the perceived frequency of individual teachers' participation in collaborative activities and the general perceived presence of certain norms and beliefs in the school.

With regards to the stimulating factors, research tells us that the importance of school leadership for the improvement of teaching cannot be underestimated. School leaders have a strong influence on their teachers and the learning environment in their school (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Stoll et al., 2006). However, there is discord in the literature regarding what type of leadership is the most important in promoting strong PLCs. In general, especially the role of transformational leadership for PLCs has been widely recognized and researched (Hord, 1997; Olivier & Hipp, 2010). Instructional leadership, on the other hand, is very relevant for student success (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), while research regarding the contribution to PLCs is more scarce and results in rather mixed findings (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007). This leaves us wondering about which leadership style affects teachers' perceptions the most and thus contributes to supporting a strong PLC in schools. In this study, we contribute to untangling this matter by including experienced teachers' perceptions of both instructional and transformational leadership in the same model, with different interpersonal PLC characteristics as outcome variables. This approach allows the merits of both leadership styles to be uncovered for each interpersonal PLC characteristic separately and takes into account that the importance of a leadership style may vary depending on the characteristic. Furthermore, schools do not operate in a vacuum and a review study has shown that structural conditions of the school context can foster or impede strong collaborative environments (Stoll et al., 2006). Hence, we will control for several structural school characteristics in this study, because omitting these could influence our key findings regarding the relationship between school leadership and interpersonal PLC characteristics.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework we put forward in this study is visualised in Fig. 1. The main study purpose is to identify how teachers' perception of school leadership is related to several perceived interpersonal PLC characteristics. In this regard, we incorporate two school leadership variables (instructional and transformational leadership) and three interpersonal PLC characteristics (collective responsibility, reflective dialogue, and deprivatized practice). In the following paragraphs, we will explain in depth the importance of each variable in this model.

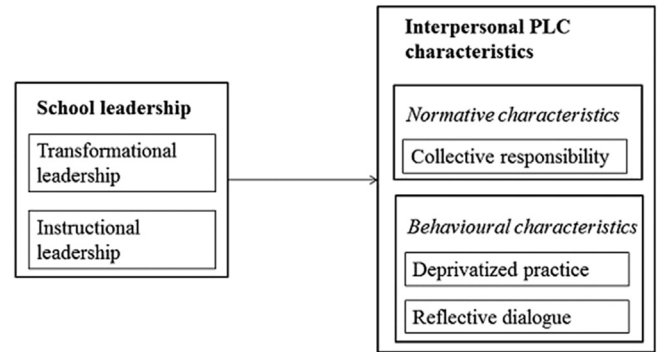


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

2.1. Professional learning communities

The concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) has gained considerable momentum over the past decades in literature concerning teacher learning (Vescio et al., 2008), since schools are increasingly seen as appropriate and desirable contexts for teachers' professional learning (Kwakman, 2003; Stoll & Louis, 2007). The essence of schools functioning as PLCs lies in the collaborative work cultures for teachers where systematic collaboration and supportive interactions between teachers take place. Teachers engage in these activities from a critical point of view, with a focus on their own learning and the enhancement of their effectiveness as teachers. Hence, the ultimate goal is teaching all students in the best possible way (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997; Kwakman, 2003; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011a; Stoll et al., 2006; Vandenberghe & Kelchtermans, 2002). This kind of collaborative environment has been identified as promising for improving the quality of teaching and for moving educational systems forward (Barth, 1990; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2009; Vandenberghe & Kelchtermans, 2002; Vescio et al., 2008). For example, participation in PLCs has been linked to improvement in classroom practices (Goddard et al., 2007) and to an increased sense of work efficacy and in turn increased motivation and satisfaction (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Equally, Little (2002) stated in her literature review that research findings agree on the important contribution of professional communities to instructional improvement and school reform.

2.1.1. Dimensions of PLCs

The PLC concept has previously been referred to as fuzzy (DuFour, 2004), due to a variety of definitions and the substantial differences in the comprehensiveness of operationalizing PLCs (Bolam & McMahon, 2004; Lomos et al., 2011a). Slegers et al. (2013) used the model of Mitchell and Sackney (2000) in an attempt to address this issue. The authors described the PLC concept as multidimensional, including organizational, personal, and interpersonal capacities. Firstly, organizational capacity includes supportive resources, structures, and systems, such as available time, information, and materials. It also encompasses cultural elements related to relationships and school climate (e.g. mutual trust, respect, networks, and partnerships) and stimulating and participative leadership. Secondly, personal capacity refers to teachers' active and reflective construction of knowledge, which implies examining and adapting teachers' cognitive structures and theories. In addition, the application of scientific knowledge and best practices is part of the personal capacity. Thirdly, interpersonal capacity contains behavioural elements such as shared practices between teachers, collaboration, reflective dialogues, and

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