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Strengthening Professional Learning Communities – Case Study of Three Neighboring Schools in Madagascar

Abstract

Due to the facts that in the context of Protestant Malagasy education, 80 % of all teachers have not received initial teacher training and that funds are limited to provide adequate further training, professional learning communities are presented as a tool to enhance teacher capacities and educational quality. The article presents a controlled teacher training intervention followed by a qualitative research project. The results show that while professional learning communities may be an effective tool to enhance educational quality there are also some hindrances linked to it such as the superiority or inferiority complex among the teachers of a group.

Keywords: *professional learning community, primary school teachers, Madagascar*

Zusammenfassung

Angesichts der Tatsachen, dass im evangelischen madagassischen Schulkontext 80 % der Lehrkräfte keine Ausbildung haben und finanzielle Mittel fehlen, um notwendige Fortbildungen zu gewährleisten, werden professionelle Lerngemeinschaften als eine Möglichkeit präsentiert, Lehrerkompetenzen und Bildungsqualität zu erhöhen. Der Artikel stellt eine kontrollierte Interventionsstudie für Lehrkräfte vor, an die ein qualitatives Forschungsprojekt anschloss. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass professionelle Lerngemeinschaften ein Instrument zur Erhöhung der Bildungsqualität sein können, es jedoch auch Hindernisse gibt, wie z.B. Überlegenheitsgefühle und Minderwertigkeitskomplexe innerhalb der Gruppen.

Schlüsselworte: *Professionelle Lerngemeinschaft, Primarschulkräfte, Madagaskar*

Introduction

Strengthening professional learning communities is a topic which can be seen in the discourse on learning quality. What is more, the teacher, being one of the most decisive actors of education quality can contribute to its achievement. The discourse on learning quality of the individual, as his personal development in a learning community as well as the growth of the group as a whole, is one of the indicators to reach high competences of students who are under their responsibilities.

The community of practice of teachers is a learning method that can be used as a means of improving education quality and of learning in a community of teachers of the same school, from the same community or who have the possibility to communicate and exchange together and who share the same interest in teaching. The essential is that people develop and learn, individually as well as jointly as a group.

Based on the conceptual explanations of communities of practice and in light of the current problem of teachers being not sufficiently qualified, the study to be presented in this article addresses the question whether communities of practice among primary school teachers could be a solution to improve the teaching practice and thus raising the education quality. The present article therefore develops and discusses the experience of implementing communities of practice within three neighboring primary schools in Madagascar to mitigate the problem of lack of teacher training mentioned above.

The conceptual background:

Communities of practice

Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as a community of people who are engaged in a collective learning process in a shared domain, as a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better when they exchange regularly. Theoretically, to form a community of practice, there is need of three conditions which are the domain, the community and the practice (Wenger, 1998). The domain is the common interest in a specific topic in which members are involved and which differentiates them from others. Community means that by pursuing their common interest, they engage in combining their activities, exchanging, helping each other and sharing information. They build relationships which allow them to learn one from one another. Finally, it is suggested that the members are practitioners who all have experiences and knowledge to deal with problems concerning their domain of interest.

Besides the three essential conditions, there are also three characteristics of the communities of practice: a joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 2000). The joint enterprise suggests that all members contribute with their ideas, personal experiences, and their competences to achieve a common goal set by the community to benefit from

this community. For Wenger (1998), the community of practice is a social learning system in which members learn something through their participation and by sharing experiences. In addition to the joint enterprise, mutual engagement is the second fundamental aspect of communities of practice. This mutual engagement puts each member in the same level. For this to function, it is necessary for members to know each other to be able to determine who to ask in case of need or for advice to ensure productive interactions (Wenger, 2000). The third aspect of communities of practice concerns bringing together competences of each member for the achievement of the group's common goal. For Wenger (2000), it is about bringing together the abilities and competences of each member of the community while being aware of the competence that the community as such wants to develop. The objective of the community of practice is to produce something, and in the case of the community of teachers, this product may be educational tools.

Working together for a common goal, with each member contributing according to his or her own abilities and competences, helps to develop a sense of joint understanding and identity, despite the fact that individual members will still be perceived as individuals (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Focusing on the group rather than on individuals also leads to the fact that within communities of practice, there is no particular role assigned to one person all the time. Roles may change according to who contributes most actively to the collective activities as well as the knowledge of the community (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). This may vary according to the activity, to the product to be developed, or topic to be discussed. Thus, people can be more at the center of the community at one point while being at the periphery of the community at other times. What stays important is that all members contribute – even if the intensity and level of commitment may vary at times.

Theoretically, the community of practice is ideal because it allows both the individual as well as the community as such to learn and develop. According to the concept of communities of practice, no member should be left behind in the group, as everyone should be present, participate in every activity of the group and be appreciated in the same way. However, in the professional environment and particularly in the teaching one, hierarchies exist in fact. This hierarchy can be the equivalent of seniority, of qualification and simply of birth-right, particularly in the Malagasy context. This can affect the proper functioning of communities of practice. If working together, teachers may share their invisible desires, competences as well as their weaknesses. In this regard a lot of trust is necessary to allow collaboration among teachers (Perrenoud, 1994).

It is important to notice though that communities of practice cannot substitute learning that teachers need to improve their daily practices. In fact, to achieve education quality, teachers must not only have all necessary knowledge to reach education quality, but also know how to integrate it in their context. Communities of practice therefore cannot be substituted by initial and continuous teacher training which should always accompany them. Nevertheless, communities of practice are a methodology that offers an opportunity for teachers to train themselves and advance towards more education quality. In Madagascar, while having attained high levels of access to education the level of educational quality, especially in prot-

estant schools is still low. The protestant education system is inherited from the first nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon missionaries. Protestant education in Madagascar sees more than six hundred schools spread throughout the island. The main problem of protestant schools in Madagascar is the lack of qualified teachers. Among the 2000 teachers in protestant schools, only 10–20 % have received initial training, meaning that about 80 % of teachers lack the basic training to exercise their teaching function.

Methodology

Since the research question of the study presented is associated with the understanding of processes of quality improvement, the study was conceptualized as a controlled intervention followed by a small research. I will briefly describe the methodology of the intervention and afterwards the research design.

Intervention to strengthen communities of practice

A workshop on communities of practice was organized for the teaching staff of three schools that had already participated in educational training sessions and had received a basic introduction to communities of practice. Teachers who participated in this workshop were expected to introduce communities of practice to ensure the sustainability of the training. As indicated above, a community of practice that works well may play an important role in improving the quality of education. With the acquisition of new concepts and techniques, the objective of raising teaching quality may be achieved. It was therefore necessary for every participant to acquire the necessary knowledge as well as competences in regard to the community of practice in order to be able to later offer it to others. The idea of intervention was to allow participants to compare themselves with regard to their own practices and possibly the results of these practices. Activities done during the workshop were expected to bring up alternatives to be used by participants after the training.

As most of the teachers had not received initial training, communities of practice should allow for their professional development. As the intention was to teach them the methodology of communities of practice, the best way to learn it is practice. The methodology of learning communities was therefore applied in the workshop. Participants were able to experience learning communities via a chosen theme and then to understand its application, its benefits as well as its challenges. Reading was chosen as the theme to be discussed on, exchanged on with sharing of professional experiences by participants in order to find ways of improving its learning at primary education level.

Three nearby schools were selected for a strengthening of communities of practice for primary level teachers to allow them not only to exchange among teachers of each school, but also between teachers of the three schools. In short term, teachers were expected to facilitate learning of reading thanks to new methods and appropriate tasks and to increase collaboration among teachers through more sharing of experiences. In the long run, teachers were expected to create teaching aids and active methods to be used in their daily teaching processes and for the benefit of the learning of their students. Besides, specific objectives were to promote team work for own development and development of all the community members; to share knowledge, competences and experiences; to be able to listen

in a multicultural context to different perspectives and experience different capacities; to transform theories into practice; to evaluate knowledge and experiences; to reflect together on learnt content and its application; to reflect together the problems encountered; to research on topics which had been agreed on before; and to operate communities of practice.

Evaluation by focus group interview

In order to evaluate the outcome of this intervention and as there is not yet a lot of knowledge about the practice of communities of practice, a qualitative approach was chosen. The objective was to analyze the understanding and interpretations of communities of practice among those who had participated in the workshop. It was set important to understand what teachers think about the communities of practice and how they use them in order to be able to further develop this practice and maybe further improve the training given. Therefore it was important to understand how the participants experienced the community of practice during the training, how they evaluated their collaboration, and what happened after the conducted intervention in regard to the further implementation of the communities of practice.

As the aim of the intervention was to get people to work together in communities of practice, establishing cooperation and teamwork, it appeared necessary to not separate the communities for the data collection, but rather chose a method which would reinforce those communities. Therefore the focus group interview was used as method of data collection. In regard to the aim of this research which was to understand the experiences and perspectives of the teachers, the five functions of the focus group interview respond perfectly to this objective (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Firstly focus group interviews provide the researcher with information about how a group thinks about a specific topic. Secondly, it helps the researcher to get access to shared knowledge among the group. This seemed to be important as the functioning of communities of practice highly depend on a shared perspective of its members. Thirdly, the researcher may receive insights on a new idea or a new baseline of information concerning a specific topic. Fourthly, a focus group interview helps the researcher to explore an issue where opinions and attitudes are not yet established and where researchers want to understand the consensus of a group rather than get individual understandings on a topic. Fifthly and finally, it may help the researcher to develop guiding questions for individual interviews and to check the data collected by means of other methods.

Members of the focus group interview were a principal, a teacher, a teacher trainer and two resource persons. The focus group interview was recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by the use of the content analysis method, as this method allows analyzing written, oral and visual data (Cole, 1988). It is also both a systematic and an objective way to describe and quantify a phenomenon (Krippendorff, 1980; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Sandelowski, 1995) as well as a method to analyze documents (Neundorf, 2002). The objective of the content analysis is to gain a condensed description of a larger phenomenon by grouping it into concepts and categories. While there are two approaches to content analysis, I used the inductive approach as it seemed the appropriate approach for this research. The

inductive approach is used when there is not much information known of the subject yet (Lauri & Kyngas, 2005) which is the case in regard to the use of the community of practice within protestant schools in Madagascar.

The inductive approach consists of three phases (Dey, 1993). In the first phase of the analysis (preparation) I chose those parts of the focus group interview where participants talked about their perspectives on the community of practice and their individual and joint learning. During the second phase of the analysis (organization), the data was coded, meaning that the data was regrouped according to the topics discussed and categories were generated. Those categories were then classified in order to reduce the number of categories (Mc Cain, 1988; Burnhard, 1991) and to receive a general understanding of the topic. The last phase then consisted of description of the findings in the sense that a clear understanding of the topic is achieved.

Results

Description of the results

The data analysis led to the following description of the qualities in the field (see tab. 1 and 2):

Results	
Group	Quality
Teachers in the same school	Trust in others Get to know each other Directive coming from the direction of the school
Teachers from different schools but teaching all the same level of education	Same teaching objectives Similarity of the problems encountered in classrooms
Teachers from different schools but who undergo the same training	Familiarity (knowledge of the other) Same interest in training
Same school teachers but with different backgrounds or status at school	Teachers prioritizing their profession more than other problems Self-confidence Teachers relying on their Christian faith and promoting Christian values

Table 1: Summary of positive results; source: own presentation

Summary of results

For school leaders, according to one interviewee, working within a community of practice is acquired. One of the school leaders organizes a joint working session once a week. Being organized in this way facilitates the meeting of the community of practice and thus realizing required results becomes easier. Time was availed to accomplish given activities as well as the necessary means. According to him "getting used" to work together or exchange "... we put them together later to get results. What we did was a success ..." (00:41:00). Participants were organized into sub groups in each school before organizing them into a large group.

Results	
Group	Quality
Teachers from the same school	Lack of trust in others Lack of knowledge of the other Lack of guidelines coming from the direction of the school Complex (superiority or inferiority) Lack of self-confidence Fear Lack of empathy Concern of everyday life (problem related to daily life resulting from too busy teachers with their social problems and creating criticisms and disparaging remarks among themselves) Lack of initiative to approach the other or self-organization still waiting for the institution to organize
Teachers from different schools but teaching in the same level of education or who undergo the same training	Status problem (same class but different position within schools: Director / teacher, younger / older, highly qualified / less qualified...) Problem of culture: for example man / woman relationship: the wrong understanding of society compared to the frequency of appointment or collaboration of two persons of opposite sexes constantly working together
Teachers from the same school but who are of different backgrounds or status at school	Teacher acting as competent or experienced and lowering the other qualifying him / her as a 'novice' or vice versa Teachers staying slaves of age

Table 2: Summary of problems of non-acquisition; source: own presentation

For teachers, collaboration went fairly well, especially within each school. Those participating in the interviews always mentioned that teachers feel the need to work together. For one of the interviewee, "the result of our collaboration was satisfactory given that teachers were able to collaborate with each other" (00:18). He mentioned that many have enjoyed having the opportunity to share their problems with others but also to have the possibility to help and explain what they understand on the topic discussed on (00:21:00). However, there have been cases of teachers who do not speak. It's always those who speak who speak. (00:25:00).

Finally, complexes exist within schools, in particular, regarding seniority and position occupied in school. One of the interviewed reported that teachers do not want to work with others because of the superiority or inferiority complex that exist among them. (00:30:00).

Discussion

The big question that arises in this article is whether communities of practice is or is not an effective solution to improve the teaching practice of the primary school teachers, who are already working as teachers in class and who already possess experiences and knowledge though their experiences in the classroom.

The joint enterprise

Most of the teachers showed a joint commitment in the activities and works given. Three weeks after the intervention, they were able to jointly produce specific lesson plans for each primary grade level. During the discussion after the presentation of these lesson plans, the collaboration among them has started and is expected to continue. There have been problems but the common interest towards learning success has prevailed.

Mutual commitment

This fundamental aspect of communities of practice has been observed. It has been more observed among the teachers from the same school and less among teachers from different schools. But this is justified by the remarks made by Wenger (2000), arguing that people need to know each other well, creating thus an atmosphere of trust, to succeed in better working together.

Sharing of competences

This crucial experience in the implementation of communities of practice has been observed in the experiences of all three schools. During the focus group discussion, while everyone was presenting their experiences as well as their problems, possible solutions were suggested.

Socio-constructivist aspect of communities of practice

In practice, teachers from the three schools have all learned something on the topic they chose. They have constructed their own knowledge. That is certainly not obvious but, little by little, as they start to work together, they exchange experiences and learn together.

Learning to learn

According to Smith's theory (1988) on the will to learn and to be part of a circle, teachers in a burst of wanting to be part of teachers' circle who are competent, have agreed to work together and accepted to complete the assigned work.

Multiculturalism aspect of communities of practice

In the very hierarchical Malagasy society, it is a challenge to achieve the acceptance of multiculturalism between those of higher age, those with many degrees and those in positions of responsibility. In communities of practice, the leader of the group is the person who knows most about a given topic or is the most competent in regard to the topic chosen. However, in a hierarchical society, transferred into the school environment, it's always the eldest or the one with the highest degree or the one in the highest leadership position who holds this principal role. Two participants, for example, handicapped by their lack of experiences being new in the eyes of their peers, have struggled to be accepted by their colleagues. Referred to as novice, while they have already followed many more teachers' trainings than most of their colleagues, one of them reacted badly and was asserting his place, not as a member of the community, but as head of the school, so entitled to impose its opinions. On the other hand, the attitude of the other one who always showed his teacher's side, therefore became full member of the community of the teachers, because or despite of his personal

experiences, managed to better join the group. The willingness to learn and share, despite appearances, helped this person to approach the others and to help the others to approach this person.

Strengthening of communities of practice

In general terms, the result of the strengthening of communities of practice is rather positive in the case of the three protestant schools. This research shows that the implementation procedures to be followed have been understood and to continue the process, procedures have been formalized in order to ensure the sustainability of what has already been achieved. Not only have the lesson plans been jointly developed, but in addition to them preparation sheets were developed which are another step towards better teaching. Good teaching is characterized by effective planning and good classroom management. This is a feeling which is shared by most of the teachers. In practice, and this is linked to the Malagasy culture, the level of investment and commitments in the communities of practice differ from one community to the other, but the will is always present. These commitments and investments are conditioned here by:

- Anonymity or non-participation because, the more the work is anonymous, some feel more secure and participate better,
- Gender, that is to be part of the same gender group,
- Family status, between married people or those who are not,
- Years of experience,
- The status in the school.

Conclusion

In the case of the protestant schools within the study presented, which are handicapped by a lack of initial training, and unable to sustain continuous trainings in the long term based on foreign aid, the communities of practice can actually become a way to achieve quality of education. Communities of practice are already used in several countries and in different contexts. On the one hand, it is an offer to each individual of the community of practice to access new knowledge, while at the same time helping his / her colleagues to do better. This aspect is proven by the production of teaching materials. Collaboration improves among teachers of the same school but also among the teachers of the three schools. In addition to the formal establishment of communities of practices by the headmasters, non-formal meetings are already taking place among those teachers.

Improvements are also hoped for in regard to some teachers who still behave very shy in relation to others. The remaining major challenge is how to deal with the weight of the too hierarchical culture of the Malagasy society, which can be seen among other things in the ethnic diversity, the power of the elders, the caste structure, or others (Rasamoelina, 2012). The same stratification exists also in schools. Moreover, studies have shown that communities of practice achieve better when each member is valued and appreciated. It is therefore important to recommend their introduction in many more schools. Faith and the protestant values should be used more to face the problems mentioned.

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