

# Exploring History Teachers' Understanding of the Role of Professional Learning Communities in Curriculum Implementation

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**Abstract:** The present study examined the understanding of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) among history teachers in South Africa. The research focused on a sample of 10 teachers from five schools in the UMgungundlovu District in KwaZulu-Natal. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Community of Practice (CoP) and adopting a qualitative approach, the study employed a case study design and utilised both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to generate data. The generated data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis. The findings indicate that history teachers perceived PLCs as academic groups that fostered the development of historical content knowledge, new teaching approaches, and relevant assessment techniques through collaboration, engagement and the sharing of professional insights. It was also revealed that history teachers employed various strategies within PLCs, such as lesson study, workshops, seminars, and the integration of information and communication technology (ICT), to enhance the implementation of the history

curriculum. The study recommends that school principals, with guidance from the Department of Education, take the lead in establishing Subject-Specific Professional Learning Communities (SSPLCs) to fully leverage the potential benefits of PLCs across all subjects in the school curriculum. Furthermore, it is suggested that some history teachers may require additional training in digital skills to effectively participate in virtual PLC activities. By contributing to the existing body of knowledge, this study advances the understanding of the best practices for using PLCs to improve school effectiveness and efficiency.

**Keywords:** History teachers, professional development, professional learning communities, communities of practice, curriculum implementation.

## 1. Introduction

Regardless of the extensive studies on the critical role of professional learning communities (PLCs) in promoting learner achievement and teachers' professional growth, there is limited knowledge regarding history teachers' understanding of their role and the strategies they could employ in PLCs to enhance history curriculum implementation in South African schools. Recent studies by Bertram & Mxenge (2023), Clark et al. (2023), Botes, Moreeng, & Mosia (2022), and Chen (2022) have revealed the complex interplay between PLCs, teacher development opportunities, and curriculum implementation. However, the specific impact of PLCs on history teachers' professional growth following their initial training remains a significant gap in the understanding of how they navigate the complexities of teaching history in South Africa using PLCs. Considering this gap, this study aims to explore history teachers' perspectives on the role of PLCs and the strategies they can employ to enhance history curriculum implementation in schools. Emerging studies acknowledge that professional development for teachers is an urgent matter that affects curriculum implementation,

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learner achievement, and teachers' work (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023; Botes et al., 2022; Chen, 2022), and therefore requires what Aydoğmuş and Kurnaz (2022) refer to as reflective thinking in the application of pedagogical approaches.

In previous studies, the value of PLCs has been explored in various fields, including Physical Education (Gonçalves et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2022), life sciences (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023), natural sciences (Marimandi, 2022), and Mathematics (Harvey & Teledahl, 2021). In their study, Zulu and Mukeredzi (2021) examined the extent to which two teacher-learning communities to determine if they operated as professional learning communities. They found that these communities were initiated by the Department of Basic Education rather than teachers themselves. The researchers concluded that professional learning communities in developing contexts are more effective when all stakeholders actively participate in supporting them. However, it is important to note that this study was small in scale, and its findings may not be applicable in a broader context.

In a larger study, Tang and Ye (2023) explored the impact of PLCs on faculty professional development in English Teaching. They discovered that PLCs had varied but positive effects on faculty members, particularly in areas such as teaching reflection, practice renovation, and implementing teaching research. Similarly, Clark et al. (2023) investigated how university lecturers shared their learnings from participating in a PLC programme to enhance their teaching capacity. The results revealed that PLC fellows appreciated the programme's diversity, acquired new skills applicable to their coursework, gained confidence in sharing information and resources, and valued the programme's accountability. This suggests that universities can effectively empower lecturers to develop innovative teaching approaches by implementing the PLC model.

In another study, Chen (2022) investigated teachers' learning experiences in a subject-based professional learning community in a junior secondary school in Shanghai, China. Through collaborative action research, the findings demonstrated that teachers developed new understandings and practices within the PLC. These studies, along with others of a similar nature, consistently demonstrate the importance of PLCs in supporting professional development. For instance, studies by Brodie and Chimhande (2020) and Marimandi (2022) in the South African context also reinforce the benefits of PLCs in teacher professional development, specifically in Mathematics and Natural Science, respectively.

However, despite the known use of PLCs in other subjects in South Africa, there is a lack of understanding about their value in intensifying teacher development and enhancing the teaching and learning of the history curriculum. This gap in knowledge hinders our understanding of how novice history educators can stay up to date with current research and meet 21st-century education demands. It is necessary to explore history teachers' comprehension of the role of PLCs and how they utilise them to improve history curriculum implementation, using South Africa as a case study. This research aims to address this gap by uncovering teachers' understanding of the value of PLCs and how they strategise to enhance history teaching. The findings of this study can inform more effective ways to improve history teaching, enhance learner achievement, and contribute to global scholarship on the best practices for using learning communities in schools. The central question of our research is: How do history teachers understand the value of using professional learning communities to enhance history curriculum implementation?

## **1.1 Research objectives**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- Establish the history teachers' understanding of the role of PLCs in enhancing curriculum implementation in South African schools.
- Explore how history teachers use PLCs to enhance curriculum implementation in South African schools.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Professional learning communities**

Even though studies recognise professional learning communities (PLCs) as a holistic approach to school reform, there is disagreement over the definition of the term. PLCs are essentially a component of professional development. Various definitions and descriptions of PLCs exist, according to Bendtsen et al. (2022). From their research, five dimensions of a PLC emerge: supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice. Voelkel (2022) supports this by stating that, while definitions differ significantly, most educators and researchers believe that the primary goal of these communities is to improve teacher practices and student learning. Chen (2022), following Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), provides a comprehensive definition and argues that PLCs are generally regarded as teams of teachers seeking to enhance the educational experience of students by regularly engaging in interactive conversations, experimenting with alternative instructional techniques, and critically reflecting on their own experiences to build their individual and collective teaching capacity. For the purposes of this study, PLCs are communities of teachers who come together to learn from one another as a group through discussions, reflections on practices, and the use of students' work to enhance instruction and learning with the aim of increasing student achievement.

While PLCs have increasingly been used in designing and discussing teachers' professional development, the way they are organised and framed varies between contexts. PLCs operate at individual, school, district, or national levels, and they also differ from country to country. As suggested by Chen (2022), different interpretations and practices of PLCs have emerged in different settings. For example, in Western contexts like the US, PLCs are usually teacher-driven and loosely organised (Hargreaves, 2019), while in some Asian systems, such as Singapore, they follow a state-led approach (Hairona & Dimmock, 2012). In Africa, such as in South Africa, PLCs are a mixture of state-led and teacher-driven (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023). This mixture creates tension between policy and what is implemented in schools. Although the idea of PLCs was adopted from the West in South Africa, the practice has also been institutionalised in China as teaching research groups (Chen, 2022) and in Zimbabwe as cluster groups (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023). Professional learning communities operate at different levels of the education system. They can exist at the individual teacher's level (Marimandi, 2022), at the school level (Hargreaves & Rolls, 2020), and at the cluster level (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023). At the individual level, teachers teaching the same subject help each other teach topics they are not comfortable with (Kin & Kareem, 2021). At the school level, experienced teachers share innovative ideas with novice teachers in designated spaces (Hargreaves & Rolls, 2020). At the cluster level, different schools in the same catchment area come together and collaborate in sharing experiences (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023).

### **2.2 Affordances and complexities of professional learning communities**

Upon graduating from initial teacher training, many teachers experience isolation as they find themselves alone in their classrooms without any assistance. Studies have shown that teachers have traditionally been isolated in schools, leading solitary lives while practising their craft in secret (Gajda & Koliba, 2008; Harvey & Teledahl, 2021). It is undeniably challenging to improve and foster student achievement when teachers are working alone. However, the majority of teachers still teach students alone in classrooms, separate from their PLCs help promote collaboration among teachers in this isolating practice. In the 1990s, there were efforts to enhance schools through PLCs, where teachers work together to take collective responsibility for their students. According to Voelkel Jr. (2022), PLCs have gained significant attention since that time. Brodie and Chimhande (2020) explicitly explain, based on Brodie's work (2014), PLCs are designed as forums for teachers to engage in regular, ongoing, systematic inquiry into their practice. This allows them to explore their strengths and weaknesses with colleagues, develop collaborative solutions to practice-related problems, and

collectively implement new ideas for the benefit of learners. Considering these perspectives from various scholars, we argue that without insights from colleagues within the education system, the pressure to prepare students for high-stakes testing can compromise the quality of instruction and student progress.

To address this challenge, teachers can utilise PLCs to foster collaboration and enhance both student achievement and professional growth (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020). According to Chen (2022), effectively developing and implementing PLCs can significantly and systematically contribute to the professional learning of teachers as well as student achievement. The focus of teacher learning and development within PLCs, as stated by Brodie and Borko (2016), involves collective reflective inquiry to improve practice and the ability to articulate and justify decisions, thoughts, and actions based on a solid foundation of knowledge. Despite the benefits of PLCs, their establishment and operation often face challenges, as highlighted by various studies (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023; Chen, 2022; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Gonçalves et al. (2022) argue that although the advantages of PLCs are clear, debates around them still exist. For instance, the concept of "contrived collegiality" has been identified as detrimental to PLCs (Hargreaves & O'Connor 2018, p. 21), where teachers are compelled to participate in top-down learning communities that lack decision-making autonomy, spontaneity, and prioritisation of teachers' learning and development (Chen, 2022). In line with Watson (2014), Chen (2022) also argues, albeit less frequently, that when PLCs are imposed on teachers, they can potentially be utilised to silence discontent because of the community's hegemonic appeal and its normalising role as the arbiter of ideological control.

The submission suggests that schools operate within larger educational policy settings that prioritise compliance with top-down control and external monitoring. This can limit teachers' innovative practices and opportunities for professional learning in PLCs (Chen, 2022). According to Bertram and Mxenge (2023), professional development in South African schools is viewed as both the responsibility of teachers and something provided by provincial departments of education, which creates tension and paradox. However, research suggests that PLCs are most effective when they are teacher-driven, addressing their professional needs (Brodie & Borko, 2016; Chen, 2022). In PLCs, teachers are seen as professional agents responsible for self-initiated learning and improvement (Brodie & Borko, 2016; Chen, 2022). Additionally, some studies highlight aspects of PLCs that may hinder transformative learning, such as reduced community collaboration and reinforcement of callous practices (Gonçalves et al., 2022). This indicates that shifting from a culture of isolation to a culture of PLCs requires a significant commitment from each group member.

Despite these challenges, several studies have shown the effectiveness of PLCs in promoting teacher professional development and improving learner achievement in subjects like Physical Education, Natural Sciences, Life Sciences, and Mathematics in South African schools (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023; Feldman, 2020; Harvey & Teledahl, 2021; Marimandi, 2022). However, the impact of PLCs on history curriculum remains understudied. Evidence suggests that history teachers still struggle with implementing teaching strategies, utilising appropriate resources, and employing effective assessment approaches (Bester, 2016; Moreeng & Du Toit, 2013). Our study aims to explore how history teachers perceive the value of PLCs and examine their experiences using PLCs to enhance the teaching and learning of history in South African schools. The findings will have significant implications for developing effective ways to leverage PLCs for improving history teaching, enhancing learner achievement, and contributing to global scholarship on best practices for PLC implementation in schools. Consequently, this paper provides valuable insights into the role of PLCs in enhancing curriculum implementation in history education and offers practical recommendations for supporting and strengthening PLC initiatives in South African schools.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

To explain the creation and use of PLCs in improving history curricula implementation, this study is grounded in Communities of Practice (CoP). The concept of CoP was initially introduced by Lave and Wenger in 1991 and has since been refined and expanded (Flanagan & Phi, 2023). In the most recent version, Wenger (1998) argues that CoPs emerge out of necessity and exist in various settings, both within and outside formal organisational structures. The CoP framework consists of four key components: learning as doing (derived from practice), learning as belonging (to a community), learning as becoming (shaping identity), and learning as experience (constructing meaning) (Flanagan & Phi, 2023). At the core of the CoP framework are essential principles, including a shared domain, shared practice, and the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Malik & Haidar, 2023). These characteristics suggest that participants in CoPs engage in collaborative thought processes, intentionally interact around authentic tasks, and strive to improve their practice (Finefer-Rosenbluh & Power, 2023). This theory helps us understand how history teachers utilise PLCs to effectively contribute to, promote, develop, and implement history curricula, as learning within the CoP framework is social, collaborative, and practical (Tang & Ye, 2023). In this approach, CoP participants support one another in comprehending similar subjects or issues within their areas of interest. The CoP theory was well-suited for this study as it shed light on the rationale behind the formation of PLCs and helped identify the value, nature, and objectives of the activities in which PLC members engaged. Through this lens, it became evident that the professional growth and curriculum implementation that history teachers sought could be seen as socially situated activities that often occurred within their school contexts. The CoP framework served as a guide for the study, explaining how history teachers understood the importance of PLCs and utilised them as members of the community to collaborate, communicate, and learn from one another in order to enhance history instruction in their classrooms.

### **4. Methodology**

The study employed a case study design (Yin, 2018) and a qualitative approach to capture a group of teachers' learning experiences in PLCs within five schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The case study design allows for a close examination of complex issues, yielding an in-depth and contextualised understanding of a contemporary phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The study was framed from a qualitative approach and drawn from the interpretivism paradigm, as the two allowed us to continually tease out the history teachers' understanding of the role of PLCs and how they used them in their natural context in the course of their everyday work (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). We were then able to establish the views held by history teachers on the use and understanding of PLCs to enhance the implementation of the history curriculum. As for the use of a case study, we borrowed from Yin (2018) who sees the primary defining features of it as being a multiplicity of perspectives that are rooted in a specific context. The 10 teachers from the five participating schools were purposively selected with the aid of the school principals. We selected the teachers on the basis that they were History-trained teachers, had teaching experience, and had participated in the PLC meetings, hence were knowledgeable about what the study sought. The study employed teachers from microcosm representations of five different schools in UMgungundlovu District in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, allowing multiple voices. While it sounded plausible to study the entire population for a detailed study, time and cost concerns made it a high-priced task; hence, it was logical to pick five schools from which we selected two teachers per school for feasibility reasons (O'Leary, 2014). Following approval from the Department of Basic Education in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to conduct research in their schools, ethical clearance was acquired from the University Free State, Faculty of Education Ethics Board.

To learn more about the teachers' opinions on the use of PLCs to improve history curriculum implementation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the ten teachers, and a

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held with the ten teachers from the five schools. The semi-structured interviews took place in the participants' schools either after school hours or on Saturdays, depending on the arrangement made between the participants and the researchers. The FGD was held at lunchtime in a classroom at a pre-set school on a Friday at the end of the week to avoid disruptions that could result from using normal working hours. This decision was made to establish a calm, comfortable, relaxed, pleasant, and regulated setting. Following Yin's (2018) recommendations, participants signed consent forms, and permission to use a tape recorder during the interviews and focus groups was sought before using the interviewees' remarks in publications. Pseudonyms were used to disguise identities. The study was granted ethical approval with protocol number HSD2022/1907/23 by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Education, University of the Free State.

The generated data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of doing thematic analysis. The first phase involved becoming acquainted with the generated data, which required transcribing the data, reading and re-reading the data, and making notes about any new themes that appeared and were important to the research focus. The second phase entailed developing initial codes by systematising the coding of significant data features across the entire data collection and compiling relevant information for each code. In the third phase, issues were identified by categorising codes into potential themes and accumulating all relevant information for each theme. The fourth step involved reviewing the themes after dividing broad themes into smaller ones and combining smaller themes. Themes that did not relate to the study's focus were dropped. In stage five, subjects were named and defined, and an ongoing process of refining the emerging themes took place at this stage. The sixth stage involved producing the research report. The findings, classified by themes, are reported below.

## **5. Findings and Discussions**

In this section, we report the findings and their discussions, illuminating the history teachers' understanding of PLCs and their value in both professional development and learner achievement.

### **5.1 The history teachers' understanding of the role of professional learning communities**

This theme addresses the objective that seeks to establish the history teachers' understanding of the role of PLCs in enhancing curriculum implementation in South African schools. Subthemes that emerged include an academic group, collaboration, engagement, and sharing of professional insights, and development of pedagogical content and skills

#### **5.1.1 An academic group for learning**

The semi-structured interviews and the FGD showed that history teachers took professional learning communities as an academic forum for teachers to learn. In presenting their understanding of the term, they used words like '*group of teachers and meetings*'. For instance, in their response, TC had this to say, "*Professional learning communities are cluster meetings for teachers to learn*" while TA elaborated that, "*Professional learning communities are communities of practice, whereby teachers teaching the same subject would come together as a group at regular intervals to share notes and best practice*". This issue of coming together of teachers with the same interest was further emphasised by Teacher B who said, "*Teachers teaching the same subject, in this case, history*". The submissions by the history teachers tallies with the tenets of CoP, which claim that members' learning occurs within and across CoPs, which are groups of people who share a so-called domain of interest for something they do and who intend to learn together how to do it better (Flanagan & Phi, 2023). This suggests that participating in a community of practice allowed participants to feel supported in their work and decision-making as they faced obstacles as a united front. Being in the same subject allows teachers to contribute as equal partners in the debates and discussions. Another important issue raised by the participants was that these meetings or gatherings were supposed to happen regularly as depicted in words such as

“regular meetings” and at “regular intervals”. To further clarify that, TE explained the frequency of the meetings and said, *“In our case, we meet 5 times a year.... Orientation workshop is at the beginning of the year and then later we meet quarterly.”* Overall, the definitions offered by the participants nearly confirm Chen (2022) who defines PLCs as groups of teachers seeking to improve student learning by regularly engaging in collaborative conversations, actively experimenting with alternative pedagogical strategies, and critically reflecting on their experiences to develop their individual and collective teaching capacity. What is missing from their definitions is the nature of the discussion or conversation the teachers were supposed to engage in when they meet because teacher talk in a PLC is the discussion between peers that allows them to explicitly articulate, appreciate, and extend their understanding of practice. These conversations must unlock the tacit knowledge of teachers, make that knowledge public and shared, and therefore subject to deliberate and thoughtful changes (Zulu & Mukeredzi, 2021). This is supported by Clark et al. (2023) who claim that the term professional learning community describes how teachers engage in professional development in a collaborative, interactive, and ongoing way, in contrast to traditional models of professional development which are developed by outside experts and delivered to teachers.

### ***5.1.2 Collaboration, engagement and sharing of professional insights***

To demonstrate their understanding of the value of professional learning communities, history teachers mentioned keywords such as *engage, collaboration, sharing* and *helping*. As reported by TD who narrated thus:

*We sharpen each other's teaching methods and share knowledge in developing content notes. We also share knowledge and information on how to structure a good essay and to sustain a line of argument in essays.*

While Teacher G added, *“As teachers we share views, experiences and teaching methods and collaborate in many aspects,”* Teacher B supported this view by confirming that *“teachers help in each other... they come from different schools to engage in discussion in which we share expertise in content delivery.”*

The aspects of sharing, engaging, helping, and collaborating mentioned by history teachers confirm the activities of the members in the CoPs forums. As mentioned by Rosenbluh and Power (2023), CoP group members share a domain of interest, engage in joint activities and discussions, and assist one another. This finding is interesting and closely aligns with how PLC's purpose has been presented in the literature. As exemplified by McLaughlin and Talbert (2010, p. 35) cited by Clark et al (2023), the purpose of PLCs is to 'share a goal and work together to achieve the goal, assess their progress, make corrections, and hold themselves accountable for achieving their goal.' This finding is also supported by an earlier study by Harris and Jones (2018), which states that PLCs aim to share teaching skills and tips and enhance each other's teaching methods and knowledge in developing content. Zhang et al. (2022) argue that genuine learning in PLCs is facilitated by a shared vision focused on student learning, genuine and in-depth teacher collaboration, and a collaborative and innovative culture that encourages debate on diverse opinions. From the perspective of history teachers, they learn collectively and collaboratively by constructing meaning and knowledge, learning from each other, and reflecting on their experiences, which is supported by the CoP.

In history, novice teachers mainly shared the concept of PLCs as spaces for helping, to improve practice and improve curriculum implementation. TH remarked, *“They assist struggling schools to achieve good history results.”* In support, TJ added that *“History teachers come together to improve their teaching practice, develop programs, identify gaps and explore new teaching methods to improve pass rates in schools.”* TC summarised the purpose of PLCs well by mentioning that its purpose was to:

*Have a common aim of improving the learner's achievement through honing our teaching skills. What is of great importance is the quality of the results we produce at the end of the year. We aim to improve the quality of results not the quantity of students who would have gone through the school system.*

The finding suggests that PLC fellows share what they have learned primarily through one-to-one contacts. From the FGD, it was also noted that PLCs provide a space to deal with the isolation that has characterised traditional teaching where teachers were confined to a room attending to their students on their own. In that line of thinking, TI remarked that:

*gone are the days when teachers struggle on their own, that is called teacher isolation. When you have a problem you go to another teacher within the professional learning communities, where you share knowledge, problems, and content knowledge.*

Overall, what is intriguing about the history teachers' expressions regarding the purpose of PLCs is that the revelations suggest that teachers need to shift their focus from traditional teaching to learning in the context of CoPs. We agree with Kin and Kareem (2021) that history school teachers need to sharpen their skills and enhance their professional practices in PLCs, rather than working in isolation as is the norm in traditional classrooms. Considering this, we argue that teachers need to work collaboratively to construct knowledge and improve student learning. Instead of treating the teacher's classroom activities as an individual teacher's traditional domain, they should be open to their colleagues. Instead of waiting for tasks to be done for them, teachers need to proactively take the initiatives to engage in interactions that lead to collaborative learning. This will result in the development of quality teachers, which is a significant factor in predicting, impacting, and improving student achievement in school settings (Wenzel, Hovey & Ittner, 2023).

### **5.1.3 Development of pedagogical content and skills**

It emerged from FGDs and semi-structured interviews that besides the generic sharing, collaborating and helping activities that are evident in the PLCs, there were specific professional activities that revolved around a good understanding of teaching methods, assessment issues and history content. In the words of TA:

*We are a mixed bag of history teachers...some of us are highly skilled, experienced, newly trained, and so forth. Despite that, we share ideas on how best to teach history as a subject. For example, we discuss issues such as teaching grade 12 learners on how to write a history essay. We guide each other on which methods are suitable for teaching different concepts. We share what to teach using the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP).*

In pursuance of activities geared towards honing history teachers' skills in assessing students, TH confirmed that assessment practice dominated during the PLC meetings and narrated thus:

*We take PLCs as reflective spaces where there is a discussion of areas in which learners performed badly or well in the last school term and by extension it is also a forum to discuss the teachers' own teaching and assessment practice.*

TC added, "PLCs are spaces where we get an opportunity to improve our marking competencies. We exchange work to understand how to mark grade 12 before students write their final examinations." On how teachers use PLCs to learn history content, TE had this to say:

*PLCs are spaces where we get support on history content because the groups allow us to discuss history topics and how to develop history notes. We share audio-visual aids and resources on different topics, for example, on the topic 'Road to Democracy.'*

Teacher D further emphasised that:

*The process is made easier by the fact that teachers in a group know each other's strengths. They know very well who is good at essay-type and source-based questions. Some teachers do not like certain topics such as African history and thus concentrate on countries such as USA and Germany. Through PLCs we get to share knowledge on how to tackle such themes.*



Taken together, the findings correlate with what is expected in the CoPs where members work together and communicate with each other, thereby learning from each other in the process (Malik & Haidar, 2023). As Finefter-Rosenbluh and Power (2023) argued, in CoP, members have a common interest and, hence, share information and develop a shared repertoire of resources for their practice. This agrees with the claim that learning under the framework of a community of practice is social, collaborative, and practical (Tang & Ye, 2023). We argue that one outstanding reason for PLCs for history teachers is to support the increasingly complex skills students need to learn and work in the 21st century because studies have reported that PLCs contribute to the enhanced knowledge base and better teaching practices (Bertram & Mxenge, 2023; Gore & Rosser, 2022). It was a remarkable observation that some teachers were not comfortable covering some themes in history, yet the themes are part of the curriculum. This suggests that PLCs contribute towards helping reluctant teachers cover the syllabus after being simplified in PLCs. This position is backed by the study by Bertram and Mxenge (2023), which reports that the two main purposes of the activities in the PLCs meeting are the improvement of learner results and the monitoring of teachers' curriculum coverage and assessment practices.

## **5.2 Strategies history teachers use in PLCs to enhance curriculum implementation**

The theme addressed the research question, which aimed to examine the strategies history teachers used in PLCs to improve curriculum implementation in South African schools. Lesson study, the use of ICT by teachers to collaborate, meet, and exchange ideas, and the utilisation of workshops and seminars in professional learning communities were identified as some of the strategies employed by teachers.

### **5.2.1 Lesson study as a support strategy for teachers**

It was found that history teachers employed lesson study as a learning strategy to perfect their teaching skills. Both semi-structured interviews and FGDs revealed that history teachers met weekly at a designated school to prepare lesson plans for the coming week. This was evident in the response provided by TF:

*We met every Friday at a central school to help each other develop lesson plans for the coming week. During this meeting members of the group discuss, collaborate and share lesson planning notes. This helps us to plan the lessons which we will use to teach. Then the following Friday, we will reflect on the lessons that we taught and make some improvements on the next lessons.*

This suggests that after the teaching, there was a collective reflection session during which everyone shared the successes and setbacks in their teaching practice and talked about how to improve it in the future (Zang et al, 2022). TF was substantiated by TD who remarked that *"we share knowledge of and information on how to structure a history lesson and its activities together with the assessment issues."* The sentiment, *"teachers from better-achieving schools meet with us during weekends engage and share with us lesson facilitation skills,"* shows the presence of those with experience sharing their expertise with novice teachers. The use of the lesson study substantiates the CoP, which advances the idea that members meet for a common reason, and it is that motive that drives them to share their interests. As a result, they are motivated to engage and collaborate in sourcing solutions as a team. The finding confirms previous studies, which contend that the lesson study approach is an academic support intervention that focuses specifically on the development of teacher and teaching-specific qualities (Botes et al., 2022). This approach, in turn, allows history teachers to learn from each other's teaching practices and experiences. The response from TG further explains how they used PLCs in promoting the history curriculum implementation:

*We sometimes come with prepared lessons which we present to members at the meeting. We then discuss together the structures of the lesson from the introduction stage through to the conclusion. In that way, we plug missing gaps and strengthen our teaching practices.*

Such an approach in lesson study confirms Zhang (2022), who suggests that before teaching, each member of the PLCs independently prepares the lessons first. Then, they discuss together the teaching objectives, key content, task design, assessment practices, and so on. Seen this way, lesson study provides valuable insight into professional development that improves the way teachers teach. The lesson polishing process allows teachers to continually engage in practice, negotiate how to improve their practice, and apply their ideas to new practices. We agree with Acheampong, Atta, and Atta-Asiamah (2022) that in PLCs, teachers meet regularly to plan, study the curriculum, and assess their instruction.

### ***5.2.2 Workshops and seminars in professional learning communities***

One strategy to enhance the history curriculum implementation using the PLCs was the use of workshops, seminars and conferences at the school, cluster, district, or national level. TF contributes thus:

*During the workshops at the cluster level, subject advisors normally provide us with knowledge and information about how to structure a good essay and maintain a line of argument in the essay. Again, teachers who attend these workshops or seminars learn skills in answering source-based and essay questions. I can safely say we help each other at workshops by exchanging information, discussing history content and developing content notes.*

TE also added, *"In most cases, the practice of professional learning communities is within a cluster through workshops and seminars."* This strategy of using workshops and seminars in PLCs to enhance the implementation of the history curriculum is very interesting. It aligns with the literature, which suggests that teacher development can be provided through various models such as workshops, clusters, teacher learning communities, and networks (Chen, 2022). However, the use of workshops and seminars as forms of PLCs is problematic because the learning of teaching skills in these contexts is short-term, and what is learned can easily be forgotten, leading to a return to old traditional teaching methods. Oppi and Eisenschmidt (2022) also support this idea, stating that when the learning activity is short-term, such as a one-day seminar or workshop, it is more likely that the effects of this new knowledge disappear and old habits resurface. This suggests that the impact of short-term professional development activities is questionable and not suitable for improving teaching practices that require systemic change. The literature thus rejects the viability of workshops as a strategy for promoting sustainable teacher professional development, arguing that they are conducted in short periods of time.

In contrast to what was explained by TF is a point raised by TC who explained that *"We take the initiative of combining neighbouring schools to explain the content and provide each other with relevant and important strategies to answer examination questions and even setting question papers.* He was supported by TA who said, *"Also as teachers, we invite each other to tackle different topics."* The sentiments expressed show that different schools have diverse approaches in the use of PLCs, though the aim is the same: based on learner achievement and teacher professional development. Interestingly, TA and TC believed that teachers are agents on their own and thus must initiate their professional development at their own pace. This vision finds support in Chen, L. (2022), who claims that PLCs view teachers as professional agents taking responsibility for self-initiated learning and improvement. This is also consistent with Bertram and Mxenge's (2023) observation that early post-apartheid policies envisaged a South African teacher who had the autonomy to make professional judgments based on their school context and learners' needs. Considering these submissions, we call for the formation of professional learning communities and envision support for teachers and access to enhanced professional development opportunities at the local level because teachers are experiencing significant difficulties in accessing and receiving support, resources, and teacher professional development opportunities close to where they live and work.

### **5.2.3 Use of ICT by teachers to collaborate, meet and exchange ideas**

A striking finding that emerged from semi-structured interviews and FGDs was that history teachers were embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution to meet, collaborate, and exchange ideas to implement the history curriculum. To support that TC remarked that:

*The fourth industrial revolution has introduced technology as a benchmark for quality education in our schools. In our PLC forum, we meet, engage, collaborate and share new insights on how to create history notes and teaching media, how to teach the history content and how to assess students. We use WhatsApp groups, Google Meetings, and Microsoft Teams depending on what the PLC wants to deliberate on.*

From the verbatim, it was apparent that instead of meeting in person, history teachers could meet online anywhere and anytime, overcoming the limitations imposed by the geographical locations of schools. These were some of the advantages provided by the digitisation of education brought about by the fourth industrial revolution. By extension, the study argues that the digitisation of educational activities presents history teachers with perhaps the greatest responsibility of their time: to develop teaching strategies that can unlock the potential of individual students and prepare them with the skills needed to shape the future through innovation supported by technology. In CoPs, weak ties that encompass diverse expertise and experiences should contribute meaningfully to the usefulness of PLCs. To support this, newly appointed teachers in the current study also felt appreciated in this type of online meeting, as they were given the responsibility to share their expertise on how to use Information Communication and Technology (ICT) tools to create history content and teach online. TC shared that:

*We also contribute to the PLCs by sharing with members how to use ICT to teach certain topics and how to use movies and videos in history teaching. With ICT, PLC activities are an ongoing process.*

The finding aligns with CoP, which is described as a group of people who deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by interacting with one another on an ongoing basis (Malik & Haidar, 2023). With that observation in mind, history teachers can enhance their curriculum implementation and overcome challenges through professional learning communities, supported by communities of practice, by connecting with other teachers to share their knowledge and use different approaches to teaching and learning. However, while technology may present challenges to schools in rural areas (Chimbunde, 2023), we argue that in the 21st century, the question is no longer whether technology should be used in PLCs, but how it can enhance professional development. Literature also affirms that techniques for implementing technology in professional learning communities, such as collaboration and support among educators within PLCs, are crucial for successfully integrating technology into the history curriculum as they exchange experiences, resources, and best practices for using digital technologies (Muller, 2022). Thus, offering professional development opportunities for educators to improve their digital literacy and competence in utilising digital tools and resources for history teaching is one of the strategies for integrating technology inside professional learning communities.

## **6. Conclusions**

We explored history teachers' understanding of the value of professional learning communities and how teachers strategise in them to enhance history curriculum implementation. To examine this, we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 10 teachers drawn from five diverse and differently located schools in KwaZulu-Natal. Our findings revealed that history teachers had a good understanding of the role of PLCs and demonstrated how they used them to strengthen the implementation of the history curriculum despite some challenges that come with the advent of modern technologies. History teachers were using lesson study, workshops, and integration of ICT as strategies in PLCs to engage, collaborate, and share insights on creating history content notes, new teaching approaches, and relevant assessment techniques. These findings confirm

that PLCs can help teachers develop and hone their skills and foster the innovative approaches needed to help their history students succeed effectively. Considering the potential of the PLC model used in schools to develop the capacity for modifying teaching practice, we conclude that PLCs offer educators a way to stay up to date on research and meet educational standards. For instance, by allowing history teachers to share their knowledge, innovative and creative methods of teaching and assessment are promoted, and the classroom experience advantages both the teacher and the students, advancing the overall objective of better curriculum implementation.

## **7. Recommendations and Implications**

The use of the named strategies in this study is still in its infancy stages. Hence, we recommend that the Department of Education in South Africa and other countries in similar contexts expand these by providing support. For example, some old and experienced history teachers may not be conversant with modern technologies and need to be reskilled in this regard, so that PLCs can also be done virtually. Thus, given the increasing importance of technology in education, the study recommends further support and training for history teachers to effectively integrate ICT tools and resources into their PLC activities.

Considering the remarkable work done by history teachers in PLCs to enhance the implementation of the history curriculum, rather than having generic PLCs in schools, there is also the need for school principals, with guidance from the Department of Education or the Ministry of Education, to spearhead the formation of Subject Specific Professional Learning Communities (SSPLCs) across the curriculum. These are important, as evidenced in this study, as such kind of professional development can focus on grade-level collaborative teaching teams, organised to discuss matters relating to curriculum, lesson planning, assessment strategies, and learning that takes place in a subject. The emphasis on subject-specific professional development activities can assist teachers in deepening their content knowledge, expanding their awareness of learners' requirements, and assisting them in their planning to ensure student success.

The importance of better understanding how school principals support PLCs work cannot be overstated. However, the school principal's role in fostering and developing the collaborative process receives little to no attention in the majority of the existing PLC models and studies, if any. This study thus makes that clarion call to explore the school principals' perspectives on the value of PLCs in their schools because the implementation of PLCs is seen as a significant and potent staff development strategy that has the potential to redefine teaching and learning practices, to provide an assortment of educational opportunities contingent upon the needs of learners for years to come, and is essential to school betterment and efficacy, which school principals see as areas of their concern.

As such, recognising the crucial role of school principals in fostering PLCs, the study suggests capacity-building initiatives for principals to better support and facilitate PLC activities within their schools. Finally, to ensure the long-term effectiveness of PLCs, the research recommends that ongoing monitoring and evaluation be conducted, as well as the establishment of structures for sustaining PLC initiatives.

## **6. Declarations**

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