

RECURTURING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CASE STUDY OF IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING POLICY IN A SMALL RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL IN CYPRUS.

ΑΝΑΔΙΑΜΟΡΦΩΝΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΗ ΣΧΟΛΙΚΗ ΚΟΥΛΤΟΥΡΑ ΜΕΣΩ ΤΗΣ ΔΗΜΙΟΥΡΓΙΑΣ ΕΠΑΓΓΕΛΜΑΤΙΚΗΣ ΚΟΙΝΟΤΗΤΑΣ ΜΑΘΗΣΗΣ: ΜΕΛΕΤΗ ΠΕΡΙΠΤΩΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΕΦΑΡΜΟΓΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΕΠΑΓΓΕΛΜΑΤΙΚΗ ΜΑΘΗΣΗ ΤΩΝ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΤΙΚΩΝ ΣΕ ΜΙΚΡΟ ΣΧΟΛΕΙΟ ΤΗΣ ΥΠΑΙΘΡΟΥ ΣΤΗΝ ΚΥΠΡΟ

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Abstract

The study attempted to gain a deeper understanding of how a small rural school worked as a professional learning community towards reculturing to improve certain aspects of school life by implementing aspects of the national teacher professional learning framework. A cyclical, inquiry-based professional learning path of a professional learning community was followed (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Woodland, 2106) to achieve reculturing. Data was collected through diary notes and semi-structured interviews using a thematic analysis of qualitative data. The results revealed the importance of setting a common goal in the small rural school context and the role of the head teacher in the transition of the teachers' group into a learning community. The case study revealed the importance of bottom-up professional learning activities that align teaching staff needs with school needs and context. The teachers in the study, bounded by the contextual norms and rules of the small rural school and encouraged by their headteacher's initiative, gradually became a community, achieved reculturing, improved school and classroom practice together, saw the impact their learning had on students, parents, and teachers, created trustful relationships and made broader suggestions for the implementation of the national teacher professional learning policy.

Key words

Professional learning communities, teacher professional learning, leadership, reculturing.

Περίληψη

Το άρθρο διερευνά τον τρόπο με τον οποίο το προσωπικό ενός μικρού σχολείου της υπαίθρου αναπτύχθηκε ως επαγγελματική κοινότητα μάθησης με στόχο την αναδιαμόρφωση της κουλτούρας για τη βελτίωση της σχολικής μονάδας. Μέσα από την εφαρμογή του πλαισίου της κεντρικής πολιτικής για την επαγγελματική μάθηση των εκπαιδευτικών, οι εκπαιδευτικοί ακολούθησαν μια κυκλική, διερευνητική πορεία επαγγελματικής μάθησης (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Woodland, 2106).

Η συλλογή δεδομένων έγινε μέσω σημειώσεων ημερολογίου και ημιδομημένων συνεντεύξεων χρησιμοποιώντας θεματική ανάλυση ποιοτικών δεδομένων.

Τα αποτελέσματα αναδεικνύουν τη σημασία του καθορισμού ενός κοινού στόχου στο πλαίσιο ενός μικρού σχολείου και επιβεβαιώνουν τον ρόλο της διεύθυνσης στη μετάβαση από την ομάδα εκπαιδευτικών σε μια επαγγελματική κοινότητα μάθησης.

Η μελέτη περίπτωσης ανέδειξε επίσης τη σημασία των δράσεων επαγγελματικής μάθησης που υλοποιούνται «από κάτω προς τα πάνω» ευθυγραμμίζοντας τις ανάγκες του διδακτικού προσωπικού με τις ανάγκες του σχολικού πλαισίου. Οι εκπαιδευτικοί του σχολείου, μέσα στο περιορισμένο πλαίσιο του μικρού σχολείου στηρίχτηκαν στην πρωτοβουλία της διευθύντριας και, σταδιακά έγιναν κοινότητα, πέτυχαν αναδιαμόρφωση της κουλτούρας του σχολείου και βελτίωσαν τις διδακτικές τους προσεγγίσεις που ήταν βασικός κοινός τους στόχος. Είδαν τον αντίκτυπο που είχε η μάθησή τους στους μαθητές και τις μαθήτριες, στους γονείς και στους/στις άλλες εκπαιδευτικούς, δημιούργησαν σχέσεις εμπιστοσύνης και έκαναν ευρύτερες προτάσεις για την εφαρμογή της πολιτικής για την επαγγελματική μάθηση των εκπαιδευτικών για τα μικρά σχολεία.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

Επαγγελματική κοινότητα μάθησης, ηγεσία, επαγγελματική μάθηση εκπαιδευτικών αναδιαμόρφωση σχολικής κουλτούρας, μικρά σχολεία της υπαίθρου.

0. Introduction

Teachers' professional learning and development are crucial for school improvement (Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al, 2009) and better learning outcomes (Lloyd and Davis, 2018). The teacher, the school, and the learning activities are interactive systems that influence teacher learning (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). Teachers' professional learning activities are found to be more effective when they are sustained and intensive, involving more contact hours over a long period, rather than brief and sporadic (Guskey 2002), when they are teacher-driven, task-oriented, and related to real-life experiences and working conditions (Opfer and Pedder 2011, Admiral et al. 2021).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are one of the participatory and transformative models of teachers' professional learning (Antinluoma et al, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al,

2009; Kennedy, 2014). Participating in learning communities can lead to collective teacher efficacy, which in turn brings increase in learning outcomes and achievements (Voelkel and Chrispeels, 2017). Professional learning community models address team or group learning that is focused on student needs and on increasing student achievement as they place great emphasis on the organizational level in terms of building a culture of collaboration that would lead to school improvement (Blankenship and Ruona, 2007). According to Bryk et al (2010), the concept of the professional community may be vague as to what it includes, but there is agreement on its positive characteristics and areas of effectiveness (Antinluoma et al, 2018; Gore and Rosser, 2020; Prenger et al, 2019; Stoll and Seashore, 2007; Van Meeuwen et al, 2019).

Wenger et al. (2002) first referred to communities of practice that address the need for alignment of the community to the organization's strategy and are focused on the improvement of practice. The fundamental elements of communities of practice can be utilized to facilitate learning and improvement among teachers and address student achievement outcomes (Blankenship and Ruona, 2007). Communities are characterized by a domain of knowledge and a group of people who care about this domain and develop shared practices to be effective in it. The domain creates common ground and a sense of common identity. A community "is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships and in their process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 34). Its success depends on a personal passion for coercion to be effective, and the actual level of engagement is a personal matter even when membership is assigned. Turner et al (2017), adopting a Vygotskian approach to how people change in a community, connect the zone of proximal development to the community environment in which collective actions take place.

The evolution of a learning community is gradual (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006; Nehring and Fitzsimmons, 2011; Welsh Government, 2011) building on reflection and enactment (Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002) for initiating change in the teachers' world (beliefs, practice, results/consequences), creating space and time for teachers to share and critically research their practices in a collaborative and learning-oriented mode (Gore and Rosser, 2020). A learning community, as it works towards substantial changes that bring about improved learning, follows a circular path with key components that consolidate collaboration and collectivity, action and progress: acknowledgment of the situation, appropriation and meaning of the issue, determination to seek solutions, implementation of actions, monitoring of the results. It starts by exploring student data and educational needs, creating learning experiences for teachers, applying and exploring new knowledge, reflecting on its impact on learning outcomes, and then reactivating a new learning cycle (Darling-Hammond et al, 2009). The cyclical pathway and the ability to change are promoted through targeted dialogue, decision-making, action and evaluation (Woodland, 2016). Learning communities are places of implementation of this circular path, where teachers

work systematically and collaboratively within the field. Wenger et al (2002) suggest that the cultivation of communities of practice is enabled by the design for evolution (usually based on pre-existing personal networks), the dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, the different levels of participation, the development of public and private community spaces, the focus on value delivered to the organization, the teams, and the community members, the combination of familiarity and excitement and the creation of a rhythm for the community.

By sharing a concern or a passion and by deepening knowledge and expertise through interaction on an ongoing basis in a community (Wenger et al, 2002) the value is not merely instrumental, but it also offers the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each others' perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people. Professional learning communities improve teaching because they improve professional and school culture (Antinluoma et al, 2018; Turner et al., 2017) and give meaning to the learning environment (Prenger et al., 2019). The culture of a school is related to the values and norms, rules, beliefs, patterns of teaching and learning approaches, behaviors, and relationships among or across individuals, and culture is hard to change as it is particularly related to actions (Gruenert, 2008). The transformation in the way teachers think, act, and relate to others influences teacher identities (Gore and Rosser, 2020; Trust and Horrocks, 2017) as well as the "identity" of their school. It is thus related to reculturing, the process of transforming a culture that connects the practices of the community with the practice in the classroom and the common goal and, as such, is carried out gradually and involves opportunities and challenges. Reculturing is seen as a process of changing the perspectives and actions of the people in a school and the processes of individual and collective sense-making behind those perspectives (Geijsel et al., 2007). These changes start with situations of uncertainty in which the shared cognitive understanding is questioned. Most individuals tend to avoid these situations, not willing to negotiate the stable cognitive configuration that has been established. Turner et al. (2017) conclude that shared values and objectives, cooperation, focus on children's learning, reflective dialogue, and norms of practice-making are a challenge to the school culture based on the individual and the rationale for autonomy. They found that the elements with the greatest impact on the development of the professional learning community were the school culture, the role of professional learning, the views on the workload it brings, and the management's decision to focus on improving learning outcomes. The interaction of all these factors creates the zone of proximal development of action.

Each school defines and is defined by conditions and structures that determine the organization's ability to create a community and respond to change and deal with all the organizational, psychological, work, and cultural factors located inside and outside the school (Admiral et al, 2021; De Neve and Devos, 2017; Van Meeuwen et al, 2019). Structural and systemic elements that hinder the creation and development of a professional learning

community at school may be changes in the composition of educational staff and community or restrictions on time and space that do not facilitate meaningful collaboration between teachers. The difficulty of the timetable, the multiple requirements for teachers' time (e.g. grades, meetings, bureaucratic tasks), the physical distance between classrooms and school premises, and the isolation of teachers (lack of interaction between colleagues, especially in secondary education, "vertical" organization of education at distinct levels) are elements that hinder the work of the learning community (Antinluoma et al, 2018, De Neve and Devos, 2017; Schaap and de Bruijin, 2018;; Sprott, 2019).

In this context, leadership is identified as one of the main actors in the progression of schools as professional learning communities (Antinluoma et al, 2018). In schools functioning as professional learning communities, decision-making processes are characterized as participative, inclusive, democratic, and collaborative in confronting obstacles. Change depends on internal leadership but not entirely on the leadership of one person. Leadership is distributed and learning occurs in an atmosphere of openness. (Turner et al, 2017). According to De Neve and Devos (2017) leadership on the part of the management and the coordinator is decisive in the formation of structural and cultural conditions. Many teachers view the changes as a challenge, but others face them as a situation of conflict and of uncertainty because emotions and cognition need to be in balance. The leader is responsible for acting as a facilitator and helping the teachers realize the process and move safely towards new practices and a common understanding and shared values (Geijsel et. al, 2007). The leader can thus create "boundary experiences" in which people no longer want or can avoid the new situation of ambiguity.

Close relationships between the principal and the teachers as well as among the teachers themselves make the communication of the vision and the development of shared values easier (Antinluoma et al, 2018; Pashiardis, 2009; Turner et al., 2018). In a professional learning community, teachers themselves also take the role of leader and work with management and leadership executives to achieve performance improvement (Andrews and Lewis, 2004). Together they form a pedagogical context that acts as the transformation framework for their practices and leads to improving learning. The knowledge produced within the community and expressing the pedagogical vision of the school as an organization, interacts with the common meaning, the formed culture of learning, the way the community works and expands the school's ability to achieve its goals.

In small rural schools in particular, this relationship is strongly influenced by the distinctive circumstances and the limited opportunities to exchange views and practices (Clarke and Stevens, 2009). The power framework in a school setting is not tied to the formal leadership structure but to the people the head teacher engages with (Morag Catterson, 2017). Successful rural headteachers promote people-centered leadership and use *power with* rather than *power over* (Preston & Barnes, 2017) by creating high levels of participation and trust in a school environment where people are empowered, motivated and engaged

in a shared vision. As rural communities are influenced by societal and cultural values (Clarke and Stevens, 2009), school leaders need also to read the complexities of the contexts of small rural communities.

1. The school setting and context

The school presented in the study is a small rural school in Cyprus, located in a village not far from an urban area. The number of students, forming three different mixed forms, ranges between twenty to thirty pupils every year. The student population is regarded as homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status, coming mainly from low and average backgrounds. During the study period, apart from the deputy head teacher, the staff consisted of two teachers, who had already been working in the school for some years, and three visiting teachers who came twice a week. A secretary and a caretaker had permanent working positions in the school.

At the macro-level of the system, Cyprus education is centralised. All policies, including the regulations for small rural schools, derive from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth: allocation of the school money, design of the curriculum and books, and implementation of educational programs. At the meso-level of the school, the head teacher has limited autonomy as regards educational tasks, evaluation of the teaching staff, use of the school budget etc. The community and the parents' associations support schools financially.

In a reform phase of Cyprus educational system, a new proposal for teachers' continuous professional learning was introduced in September 2015, providing opportunities for teachers' professional learning in a cyclical, systematic way and on a needs assessment basis (Author et al, 2020). According to the new policy, the school is the core of teachers' professional learning, where it is expected that a teachers' professional learning action plan is designed and implemented as an integral part of the wider school improvement plan. In this framework, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI), as the official body for teachers' learning and training, every year offers different opportunities to schools encouraging them to follow this inquiry-based, cyclical professional learning methodology for school professional learning through the steps of needs analysis and negotiation, investigation of others' perspectives, setting a common goal/priority, training, action, reflection and evaluation to open a new cycle of professional learning. These steps coincide to a large extent with the learning cycle for creating a professional learning community as described by Darling-Hammond et al (2009).

In the school in-focus, after the first-year reality shock, the deputy headteacher had experienced as acting headteacher (Author, 2020), a professional learning cycle was initiated, based on lessons learned from the first year of headship and linked to the school improvement plan, to promote change in areas which were characterized as not satisfying. In particular, the head teacher shared her thoughts with her colleagues regarding students' behavior and the school ethos. They adopted the professional learning policy framework

and decided to focus on changes in students' behavior and school-family relations, aiming at reculturing for both teachers and students.

2. Method

The study used a qualitative case study approach to data collection. Its subject of analysis was the procedure that led the small rural school to reculturing and the characteristics of the professional learning community that was developed. In particular, the research questions that evolved are:

- Which aspects of the professional learning community enabled the transformation of the teaching staff group and the reculturing of the school?
- Which elements of the headteacher's actions enabled change?
- What impact did the professional learning community have on teachers and students?

Data was collected through diary notes and semi-structured interviews as the study aimed to be both descriptive and interpretive. During the five years of working at the school, the head teacher kept a diary focusing on the following areas: Common Goals, Knowledge and Practice. The diary notes and reflections were regularly revised and discussed – on a monthly basis- with the external facilitator from the Pedagogical Institute and memos were created. Besides, at the end of the five years of the head teacher's service at the school, interviews with the teaching staff were conducted by the external facilitator. The interviews focused on their experiences and perspectives as regards the school culture and priorities, the concept of change, professional learning, and the notion of PLCs as well as its impact on students and the staff.

The teachers' profiles at the time of being interviewed were the following:

T., a female teacher with fourteen years of experience who had been member of the school staff for four years. She came to the school one year after the acting head teacher had been appointed at the school.

M, a female teacher with twenty-six years of experience who was in her first year in the school.

J., a female visiting teacher with fifteen years of experience, coming to the school once a week.

C., a female teacher with nine years of experience who had been working in the school for the last two years.

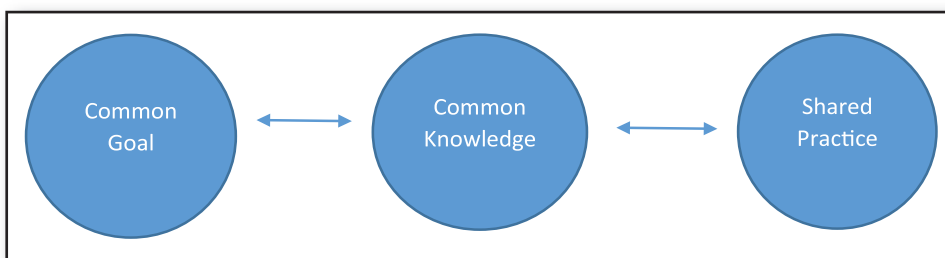
The head teacher R. was a female, deputy school head teacher, PhD holder, with more than twenty years of experience who had been working in the school for five years as an acting head teacher. She had no previous experience in a small rural school when she was appointed as acting head teacher.

The interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were analyzed into different themes related to the main aspects of professional learning, school culture change, creating a community of learning and practice, and the role of leadership. Using coding, initial themes were identified and connected to the research questions. In particular, open coding using a constant comparative method (Corbin and Strauss 2008) was used to analyze the data. The interviews were read through carefully and memos between the researchers were produced (Kvale, 2007, Kuckartz, 2014). Codes were grouped to form categories that were aligned to the professional learning communities' characteristics, to reculturing and leadership.

3. Data analysis and Findings

The implementation of the policy framework for teachers' professional learning in the school aimed to promote the creation of a professional learning community to support teachers' learning through active participation and reflection and achieve their expectations as regards their students. Data from the teachers' interviews and the head teachers' reflection diaries showed that the characteristics of a professional learning community were developed in the school and enabled reculturing. An improvement of relations and behavior shown in the school was identified in relation with the professional learning community experience. The main items that were revealed during the interviews and framed reculturing, are presented in Figure 1, reflecting the fundamental elements that combine a community of practice (common domain of knowledge, community of people, shared practice) (Wenger et al, 2002). In the school, the national professional learning framework was used to initiate common knowledge and practice and to set a common goal that derived from the teachers' needs and priorities.

Figure 1: Interaction of the professional learning community aspects



Analysis of the data revealed specific items that were linked to each of the PLC characteristics as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Items linked to professional learning community aspects

Common Goal: To create a new culture in the school unit that would include...	Common Knowledge: Explore and share knowledge	Shared Practice: Apply new procedures in order to succeed
Respect to Hierarchy/ Clear Roles and Boundaries Procedures Respect Self-regulation Autonomy Interaction	In-service school-based training Exploring sources Sharing information through weekly meetings Discussion on key points according to daily experience	Observation Acting together Changing own attitudes Reframing – Giving new meanings.

3.1. Setting common goals: Real-life situations and working conditions

The school teaching staff decided to work collaboratively in order to improve certain areas of school life and ethos that they are concerned for. At the first day welcome staff meeting, the head teacher presented the school context and set questions about the school vision. They collectively decided to explore their needs and the needs of the school and to set priorities. They concluded that this was the students' behavior and interaction in and out of the classrooms as well as the interaction between school and families.

The first year of working as a head teacher in the school was my “boundary experience”. Starting the whole process of change was not simple. Therefore, when I met the new staff and presented the school context, they were all very positive about the need for change. (Head Teacher)

A professional learning community was initiated by setting a common goal through which they aimed at changing the school culture through plans and actions that would be systematic and interactive and focus on the common goal. Reculturing had actually started through this decision and the focus on a common shared goal.

We are a small group with a common goal. That was the most important thing; we worked a lot as a team on developing children's social skills, cooperation, and collegiality. There was a hands-on experience in school life focusing on social skills. (Teacher C)

We set our new common goal... Through this, I learned a lot, how to set limits, how to organize time, how to work with the curriculum and develop self-regulating mechanisms. (Teacher T)

It was an everyday struggle to focus on details and have a common vision... there was a need for rules, for a new code of conduct in relations... (Teacher T).

All teachers agreed that reculturing was a need and decided to make it a reality. After one month of observation and exchange of opinions, they came together to set priorities according to the needs of the school. They created their school improvement plan based on the professional learning policy framework and guidelines and decided upon professional learning activities. They started to think of small steps to “re-design” the school and achieve positive interactions. Setting a common goal was central to success and revealed the different aspects of the educational system that interacted within the specific school context. It seemed to be the most important item in building up a sense of community. The teaching staff was engaged in the team spirit in order to establish and follow specific procedures and routines, have clear roles, and enable students to develop self-regulation and respect in their behavior and interaction.

3.2. Common domain of Knowledge: Exploration, Coherence, and Coordination

Developing a domain of common knowledge focused, thus, on reculturing. Teachers visualized the school in the future. It consisted of positive interactions among all members of the school unit that enabled higher learning results and respectful behaviors.

We, all the teachers often visualized a school in the framework we wanted, comparing it with higher standards in terms of working attitudes and behavior. (Head teacher)

They shared the concerns and issues that came up to the surface and had to deepen their knowledge and expertise by searching, reflecting, and interacting on a daily basis. That included school-based training and exploring sources that the head teacher brought into the discussion.

I had to take all the responsibility for the situation and provide new ideas and meanings to work together with the teaching staff and as a next step with all the other members of the school and community. (Head teacher)

It also included sharing information during the weekly meetings of the staff about “key points” or “critical incidents” from the daily experience.

We studied the importance of each point of the main goal. We reset the roles of each member of the school unit according to hierarchy and started building trust in order to see how we can extend the meanings to pupils, staff, and parents...In the weekly meetings, we discussed various scenarios based on real-life incidents at school and decided on our common strategy. (Head teacher)

The teachers reframed communication with the parents by presenting their priority and approach for their small rural school that needed a new status. They aimed at gaining respect and recognition as professionals in their educational institution.

The common goal focused on children and parents' relations... One of the priorities focused on our relationship with the students and the parents. We had to focus on details and set a new code of communication. (Teacher T.)

Reculturing involved various areas that created the coherent domain of knowledge and were put into practice in small, steady steps. Each area was analyzed in different items that needed to be explored, developed, reframed, and transformed into actions that focused on behavior in different areas of school life such as daily routines in and outside the classroom (e.g. greetings, the "Monday" smile), dress code, healthy snacks, school-environment awareness, participation in music ensembles, etc.

3.3. Shared practice: Collaboration, Sustainability, and intensity

The shared practice and experience were guided by the head teacher, by emphasizing the importance of setting priorities that were defined as a common need that had to be faced and resolved. She put that into practice herself and led her team through small steady steps of professional learning and success.

The head teacher was a leader... she had a vision, she showed us how to work... we discussed and worked together (Teacher C.)

We focused on students' behavior and relations with their parents... I learned what to say and what not to say, I was the mentor for new teachers. The head teacher was an example of good practice... She was a leader... we learn from her... That is why we need to keep the new culture (Teacher M.)

I had to do research to be able to connect every step of the process to our vision, always about the context and to theory. We needed to adapt strategies to the socioeconomic status and lifestyle of the families.... I had to understand and capture the tendencies, wait, and bring them out again at the right time. (Head teacher)

This situation was related to the daily experience of school life. They all shared practices that were developed in order to be effective. They all tried to connect personal development and learning and professional identities to the strategy of the school unit as an organization. They observed, acted together, changed attitudes, and reframed meanings and practices.

During this year, I have learned what a small school is, and what is expected and required on a managerial level, and at the same time, I worked a lot on the curriculum. (Teacher M)

Through the meetings and learning cycles, they had the chance to interact and change both as people as well as professionals. The idea of public and private spaces enabled working on their own and together. The small size of the school enabled engagement and commitment to each one's role towards success.

Throughout this year, all teachers and students in this small school had opportunities for cooperation, interaction, trust, respect, and team building (Teacher T.)

The teachers used the school experience to support their meanings and broaden school developments. They created together an atmosphere of friendship, positive communication and interaction. New methods of communication were applied, and teachers tried to be consistent and reliable and functioned as models for students and parents.

...We should be committed to keeping the same atmosphere and culture.... I came here with twenty-six years of experience..., which made me open to seeing myself, the students, and my colleagues through a holistic perspective. It was important to show respect and enhance diversity while setting boundaries, and a code of communication (Teacher M.)

3.4. The Future of a Professional Learning Community

The data showed that the common goal the school teaching staff had set, was achieved.

I could see a change regarding behavior; they are now well-behaved, and they know how to work independently to reflect or think twice about their answers. (Teacher J.)

Now the behavior has changed... They listen and do not doubt and if they do, we are always open for a discussion. There is a "new" status. They are well behaving now. They show respect... Now it is much easier to work with the kids in the first form. Behaviors improved over time because we insisted on common rules and meanings. (Teacher T.)

The change did not come from one day to the other, it took time until people moved from the new meanings and views to the new actions. However, we were insisting and had patience. I had to be strong and "draw a new line" while creating opportunities so everyone can be convinced. I organized meetings and activities and engaged everyone in this project called "Our New School". (Head Teacher)

By connecting professional learning to the organizational strategy, the teachers themselves developed new perspectives on their role and their professional learning in the school.

There is a need to understand how important is to see the parent's perspectives, and the children's views to share your observations and thoughts, interact, and share. (Teacher C.)

The impact of their work on students was connected to teachers' own professional learning and participation in the activities of the learning community.

We, the teachers also developed social skills... we learned to work together to share and to focus on the results. After all, changing the culture and the behavior needs small stable steps. (Teacher C.)

Discussions between us made me understand the context and understand the community mentality through the lenses of my own personal experiences... There is this need for time and space to discuss, to reflect, and to see what works and what does not. This is something that the centralized authorities could enable through leaders' training, school-based opportunities for workshops for students, parents, and teachers, and networking with other small schools of a similar sociocultural context (Teacher T.)

A new mindset seemed to have developed, as teachers were now able to comment on policies revealing characteristics of leaders who reflect on policies and practices and can work in a bottom-up mode through their professional learning community.

There is a need for more time to reflect, discuss, share, talk about examples, practices and experiences. If there is support from the teacher for that, this is the best. Then there will be trust and collegiality to be human and professional... This is something that the centralized authorities could enable through leaders' training, school-based opportunities for workshops for students, parents, and teachers, and networking with other small schools in a similar sociocultural context (Teacher T.)

This (experience) could also be shared with other small schools; it would be very effective. (Teacher C.)

4. Discussion

As regards the first research question "Which aspects of the professional learning community enabled the transformation of the teaching staff group and the reculturing of the school?" this case study showed that the small group of teachers was transformed into a professional learning community by sharing a common goal, critically researching their practices in a reflective, collaborative, and learning-oriented thinking (Stoll & Seashore, 2007; Voelkel and Chrispeels, 2017; Woodland, 2016;) and through developing meaningful-for-all common learning (Berwick, 2008; Langley et al., 2009).

As teachers and the head teacher stated, there is a need to work further on such modes of working, in a collective dialogue about the learning of students, the impact of their educational practice on children's achievements, and on how to adapt practices and teaching to respond to children. Individually and collectively, they delineated the challenges that had been identified in the school, prioritized their concerns, and shared experiences.

The cyclical inquiry-based path of the professional learning state policy that they had followed led to the formation of their collective theory and practice (Hollins et al, 2004).

Teachers began by formulating questions, concerns, and ideas for analyzing the data related to the issue that concerned them and gradually began to apply the steps described in the teacher professional learning policy framework to achieve new practices and small improvements. Gradually their sense of shared responsibility guided their decisions to pursue progress, and systematic exploratory procedures were integrated into the operation of the school organization. Collaboration between the teachers focused on how they would work in depth for a greater impact on progress and moved towards “collaborative professionalism” (Hargreaves & O’ Connor, 2018) which is based on how teachers jointly transform teaching and learning and on cooperation that is integrated into the culture and school life, responding to the needs and culture of the students, but also of the whole.

In the school, by focusing on reculturing, the emphasis moved to how the community can contribute to the development of the wider organization and its members, teachers, students, and learning took account of the specific socio-cultural context of the school and the common vision. The teachers’ journey from individual to social/common knowledge gave them the opportunity to reflect on whether learning in the community considers the personal dimension (Philpott, 2014) and whether there is a transition from the person who teaches in the classroom to the person who collaborates at school for a common goal (Andrews & Lewis, 2004).

As regards the second research question “Which elements of the headteacher’s actions enabled change?” it was shown that the school head teacher acted both as an agent of learning and as an agent of leadership (Swaffield and Macbeath, 2013). The characteristics of the leadership in the school were related both to the improvement of the school and reculturing, and to the development of the professional community. The headteacher influenced the culture of the school, as she focused her actions on the creation and maintenance of a productive learning community and its collective work of the learning community with an emphasis on improving the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of individuals, subgroups, and ensembles through the utilization of the school’s social capital and context (Antinluoma et al, 2018; Brown et al, 2018; Nehring & Fitzsimons 2020)

At the heart of the effective actions is the focus on the mission, the vision, and the common goal, which she transformed into an essential part of the staff interaction daily in the school. She initiated questions for reflective dialogue, tried to reduce teacher isolation, and listened and acted, promoting, thus, an approach and culture that focused on children’s behavior and school reculturing.

The headteacher also focused on practicalities. She created the conditions that would promote the professional learning community by arranging time in the weekly meeting to share practice, emphasizing mutual responsibility that maintains a vision for the school,

integrity and clear roles, and self-regulation respect. She succeeded in the development of a shared goal and collective responsibility through her own leadership behaviors and practices (OECD, 2008; Pashiardis and Brauckmann, 2009).

As regards the third research question “What impact did the professional learning community have on teachers and students?” all members of the staff agreed that the professional learning community positively influenced their satisfaction and self-sufficiency as well as the school culture. It reduced the sense of isolation and contributed to the creation of a collective culture (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Vescio et al., 2008; Woodland, 2016) that they all wanted to maintain.

Most important was that teachers identified changes in their learning as well as in children’s learning and behavior throughout their professional community (Darling - Hammond et al, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Garet et al, 2001). They supported the idea that when teachers collaboratively explore ways of overcoming obstacles to their students’ learning or behavior, they achieve a broadening of experiences and improvement of students’ performance regardless of school context and socio-economic profile (Welsh Government (2011). In the case of the small rural school in the study, the collaborative action of the teachers was indeed associated with high performance in terms of the desired children’s behavior and outcomes (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011).

5. Conclusion

In the case study presented reculturing and change in teaching processes became an ongoing, collective responsibility rather than an individual one (Wayne et al. 2008) and the importance of bottom-up professional learning that aligns teaching staff needs with school needs was revealed. The study showed that the teachers of that small rural school, bounded by their contextual norms and rules as well as by an empowered leader, succeeded in developing a professional learning community and improved school and classroom practice together, over time, through trustful relationships, common goals and shared practice (Prenger et al, 2019; Wenger et al, 2002) that took place in a centralized education system.

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