

Professional learning communities in ECE

While the literature on PLCs in ECE is limited, certain guidelines for the establishment and sustenance of PLCs, as well as recommendations for positional leaders, may be extrapolated. This guide will define and describe the characteristics of a PLC, discuss their different forms and stages, and offer some recommendations for practice.

The nature of PLCs

[Professional learning communities](#) have been defined as groups of professional teachers and leaders who work together in a purposeful way to create and sustain a widely supportive culture of learning¹. Researchers emphasise the importance of support, collaboration, reflection, and a [growth mindset](#) amongst PLC members, alongside a practice focus and a desire to improve children's learning². Effective PLCs³ are characterised by:

- **Supportive and shared leadership**, which involves positional leaders encouraging all team members to be involved in leadership and decision making.
- **Shared values and vision**, which involves all teachers agreeing on the goals and desired outcomes for the PLC.
- **Collective learning and application**, which leads to teachers working collaboratively and engaging in regular dialogue.
- **Shared personal practice**, which involves deprivatising practice with teachers observing and giving each other feedback - activities likely to result in a high level of debate and discussion.
- **Supportive conditions**, which include structural conditions such as time, resources, and supportive systems, as well as relational conditions such as respect and relational trust.
- **Inquiry processes** such as collecting and analysing data⁴.

While ECE environments lend themselves to collaborative practices, with teachers often working in the same physical space and interacting frequently throughout their working day, other PLC practices such as supportive structural and relational conditions may be more challenging to achieve⁵.

There are two main forms of PLCs, whole centre PLCs and networked PLCs. Whole centre PLCs are those in which all teachers in a teaching team participate, and networked PLCs are those in which teachers from a number of different teaching teams or centres who have a shared focus meet and interact together regularly. It takes time and application to develop into an effectively functioning PLC, and researchers often talk about different stages of the development of PLCs, ranging from early stages involving mostly individual work to genuine collaboration⁶.

Research on PLCs in ECE

Research on PLCs in the ECE sector is relatively rare and most has been carried out in New Zealand⁷. International research on PLCs is scarce⁸. Studies have found that a number of practices that support effective collaboration are needed in order to establish and sustain PLCs that lead to teacher learning and change in practice. These practices include:

- effective professional leadership
- opportunities for feedback, coaching and [mentoring](#)
- strengthening [relationships with family/whānau](#) to keep children's learning to the fore
- embedding change into the setting's culture
- prioritising time for shared reflection and meaningful conversations around learning and teaching

However, these studies have also found that these practices are not widespread, even where participation in a PLC was a professional requirement, and also that there is a disparity between teachers' and leaders' perceptions of the extent to which these supportive practices are enacted, with leaders more likely to see them as present. Studies have also found that, even where many supportive conditions are in place, PLCs are slow to become established⁹. Factors important to establishing and sustaining PLC dimensions relevant to this context will be discussed below.

Enablers to the establishment and sustenance of PLCs

Research has identified five enablers to the establishment and sustenance of PLCs in the ECE sector:

1. Clear membership and effective induction

The relatively high turnover of staff in many settings can be a barrier to the establishment and effective functioning of PLCs. Membership of PLCs needs to be made explicit: for example, are part-time and/or long-term relievers part of the PLC? New team members need to be inducted into the PLC, as research indicates that new staff members find the most effective induction occurs when there is written documentation explaining both the research focus and the nature of the PLC¹⁰. Having only some teachers participate in a PLC may constrain the development of some dimensions, in particular shared personal practice.

2. Shared learning focus, commitment, and research orientation

Choosing and agreeing on a shared learning focus for each PLC is important¹¹. This process may take some time and it is important that all PLC members are involved to ensure ongoing commitment. While the focus may change over time, having a shared vision and commitment to the inquiry, whether action research or self-review, results in strengthened teaching and learning and shifts in teacher practices. Potential benefits of these shifts in practice include better communication among teachers and between teachers and parents¹².

3. Clarity of roles including leadership roles

Research emphasises the importance of clarifying roles within PLCs¹³. While shared and supportive leadership is an expectation of PLCs, agreement needs to be reached in both whole centre and networked PLCs about who is leading which aspects of the work. The role of the positional leader is particularly important as they influence the conditions under which a PLC operates and have the potential to encourage others to become involved in leadership and engage in meaningful shared learning. The support of positional leaders is important even in networked PLCs, where they may not be active members, as leadership actions influence how effectively changes in practice are embedded¹⁴.

4. Trusting relationships and professional dialogue

Opportunities to engage in professional dialogue and to share practice are essential aspects of PLCs, and relational trust appears to be a necessary condition for allowing robust conversations to occur. Unless teachers trust their colleagues, they are unlikely to be willing to share ideas, work collaboratively, challenge practices or debate evidence. Where trust is low, conversations tend to be superficial, whereas a deeper level of professional dialogue that challenges current professional practice is evident in PLCs

with higher relational trust¹⁵. Engaging in observations and feedback, scheduling time for meetings all teachers can attend, and prioritising professional discussions have all been identified as strategies for effective PLCs leading to deeper reflection and more debate¹⁶.

5. Stimulus of new ideas

Participants in PLCs appear to benefit from being part of professional learning opportunities that expose them to different ideas and ways of thinking. This stimulus may come from working with outside researchers, facilitators or critical friends, or through membership of umbrella organisations and professional networks. Access to literature, attendance at conferences and other professional learning opportunities, and visits to and from other settings are all ways of gaining new insights¹⁷. Professionals from outside the setting have potential to stimulate reflection and dialogue and lead to shifts in practice. Having teachers involved in study is another way of accessing new knowledge and different ways of thinking, and regular opportunities to share professional learning should be provided.

Considerations for leaders

- Honestly reflect on where your team is at in regard to working as a professional learning community, and discuss this as a group¹⁸. Remember that leaders often have a more positive view of current perceptions and practices than do teachers.
- Ensure a high level of relational trust is built and maintained.
- Endeavour to build a culture within the setting that is conducive to debate, negotiation, problem solving, critical reflection and deprivatisation of practice. Ensure that teachers have time to observe each other's practices and provide feedback, and have opportunities to take the lead in professional learning opportunities.
- Ensure teacher professional learning and development is focused and deep, and there is shared commitment to investigating, exploring and evaluating practices. Ensure also that it draws on evidence and involves sharing knowledge, expertise and practice with others and challenging beliefs and practices.
- Consider how to bring in outside expertise to enhance internal expertise.

Recommended further reading

Cherrington, S., & Thornton, K. (2015). The nature of professional learning communities in New Zealand early childhood education: an exploratory study. *Professional Development in Education*, 41(2), 310-328.

Thornton, K., & Cherrington, S. (2019). Professional learning communities in early childhood education: A vehicle for professional growth. *Professional Development in Education*, 45(3), 418-432.

Thornton, K., & Wansbrough, D. (2012). Professional learning communities in early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*. 27(2), 51-64.

Endnotes

- 1 Hipp, K., & Huffman, J. (Eds.). (2010). Demystifying professional learning communities. School leadership at its best. Rowman and Littlefield Education, p. 12.
- 2 Stoll, L. (2011). Leading professional learning communities. In J. Robertson and H. Timperley (Eds.), *Leadership and Learning* (pp. 103–117). Sage.
- 3 Hipp & Huffman, 2010.
- 4 McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2006). Building school-based teacher learning communities: Professional strategies to improve student achievement. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- 5 Participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) is an expectation of the Education Review Office's revised Indicators of quality for early childhood education: what matters most (ERO, 2020). The process indicator Whakangungu Ngaio: Collaborative professional learning and development builds knowledge and capability specifies that 'Children's learning is enhanced through leaders and teachers working as a professional learning community' (ERO, 2020, p. 25). Examples of effective practice for this indicator include leaders and teachers:

accessing professional learning opportunities that involve engaging and challenging beliefs and practices

inquiring into and evaluating practice and making evidence-based changes

sharing knowledge, expertise, and practice with others

This indicator assumes that teachers benefit from opportunities to build knowledge and expertise in the context of a collaborative and supportive learning community. While PLCs are not specifically mentioned in the Educational Leadership Capability framework (Education Council, 2018), capabilities related to collaborative learning, high trust relationships, organisational improvement and networking are all congruent with PLCs.

- 6 Different models of stages of development have been developed. Hipp and Huffman (2010) suggest four stages: not-initiated; initiation (starting); implementation (doing); and institutionalisation (embedded). These stages highlight movement from teachers working in isolation with insufficient resources to committed and accountable working collaboratively, and sharing teaching practices in a culture characterised by trust and respect. Four stages are also outlined by Martin-Kniep (2008), beginning, developing, established and systemic. The first stage involves an individual focus with little collaboration, the second involves a willingness to consider changes in practice and take responsibility for the community. Teachers are participating in opportunities to learn and work collaboratively at the established level and at the systemic level, they are reflecting on practice both individually and collectively, and working towards realising their shared vision (Martin-Kniep, G., 2008, *Communities that learn, lead, and last: Building and sustaining educational expertise*. Jossey-Bass).
- 7 In 2012 Thornton and Wansbrough researched perceptions of PLCs in the New Zealand ECE sector by carrying out a national survey based on Hipp and Huffman's five dimensions. They found that, despite involvement in PLCs being an expectation of all registered teachers at that time and respondents perceiving that their centres reflected many PLC characteristics, several aspects of PLCs that support collaborative practices were not widespread. A modified version of this survey was used as part of a study exploring the positional leader's role in

distributing leadership (Denee, R., & Thornton, K., 2018, Distributed leadership in ECE: perceptions and practices, *Early Years*). One of the interesting findings of this survey was that positional leaders consistently indicated a higher level of agreement with statements than did teachers. The statement with the highest levels of disagreement was 'leadership is promoted and nurtured among teachers'. Other statements with relatively high levels of disagreement included: 'opportunities to exist for teachers to provide feedback to peers related to strengthening teaching practices'; 'the positional leader incorporates advice in decisions made'; 'the positional leader is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed'; and 'I am given opportunities to lead professional learning with my team'. These differences suggest that positional leader's perceptions of leadership of professional learning may be more positive than their team's perceptions.

- 8 Damjanovic and Blank (2017) carried out a study of teachers in a pre-school PLC in the United States finding that focusing on documentation of children's learning helped make data richer and more complex and led to collaboration and shifts in teachers' thinking about their teaching (Damjanovic, V., & Blank, J., 2017, Building a professional learning community: Teachers' documentation of and reflections on preschoolers' work. *Early Childhood Education Journal*). Vijayadevar's doctoral study found participation in PLCs supported the development of collaborative leadership practices in leaders of Singapore ECE services (Vijayadevar, S., Thornton, K., & Cherrington, S., 2019, Professional learning communities: Enhancing collaborative leadership in Singapore early childhood settings. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 20(1), 79-92). The key findings of this study indicated that participation led to some shifts in leaders' thinking about collaborative leadership practices and resulted in reported changes to their leadership approaches, distribution of leadership, and improved collegiality and collaborative learning for teachers. The results indicated that considering and implementing collaborative leadership practices through PLCs in the Singapore ECE context required sensitivity towards Asian Singapore sociocultural values related to hierarchy.
- 9 Thornton and Cherrington carried out two studies on PLCs using both whole centre and network models. The first study examined how involvement in a PLC supported changes in teacher practices that lead to improved teaching and enhanced learning, and what organisational, structural factors, relational and interpersonal factors contributed to effective PLCs (Cherrington & Thornton, 2015). Four PLCs (two whole centre and two network) were established and researched over a 10-month time frame. While some of the PLCs in this study progressed past the 'beginning' stage described above, their progress was affected by both structural and relational conditions. Structural conditions that acted as barriers included staff changes and lack of time for meetings, while relational factors included the need for relational trust so that teachers felt comfortable to engage in open discussion and reflection on their practice (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013, p. 325). A follow-up study with two PLCs, one networked involving teachers from three co-located education and care services, and the second involving all teachers from a large service with three smaller sub-teams, was carried out over a period of two and a half years using a case study approach. This study found that sustainable ECE PLCs did not come easily, despite willingness on the part of teachers and time spent working together. While the two PLCs made significant progress in some dimensions of an established PLC and achieved many of the goals of their action research projects, barriers such as changing membership, lack of induction for new members and lack of role clarity constrained their development.

- 10 Thornton, K., & Cherrington, S. (2019). Professional learning communities in early childhood education: A vehicle for professional growth. *Professional Development in Education*, 45(3), 418-432.
- 11 Thornton, K., & Cherrington, C. (2014). Leadership in professional learning communities. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 94-102.
- 12 Thornton & Cherrington, 2019.
- 13 Thornton & Cherrington, 2019.
- 14 Thornton, K., & Wansbrough, D. (2012). Professional learning communities in early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*. 27(2), 51-64.
- 15 Thornton and Cherrington, 2014.
- 16 Thornton & Cherrington, 2019.
- 17 Thornton & Cherrington, 2019.
- 18 This could be done in relation to the stages of PLCs and the examples of effective practice in the ERO indicators.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Kate Thornton

Dr Kate Thornton is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research interests are educational leadership and leadership development, mentoring and coaching, and professional learning communities. Kate is a former secondary school teacher, Playcentre parent and Head of School.