

# Influence of Informal Teacher Professional Communities on The Quality of Teacher Training Among Open and Distance Learners on The Copperbelt

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Peter Sampa  
Copperbelt Province  
University of Zambia  
Lusaka, Zambia  
[sampapc@yahoo.com](mailto:sampapc@yahoo.com)

Musonda Luchembe  
Adult Education & Extension  
Studies Department  
University of Zambia  
Lusaka, Zambia  
[mluchembe@yahoo.com](mailto:mluchembe@yahoo.com)

Daniel L. Mpolomoka  
Adult Education Department  
Zambian Open University  
Lusaka, Zambia  
[mpolomokadaniel@yahoo.com](mailto:mpolomokadaniel@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

*This paper is based on findings of a survey that was conducted to establish the influence of informal teacher professional communities on the quality of teacher training under ODL. Participants responded to a self-administered questionnaire. One of the major findings was that informal professional communities had a big influence on trainees in a number of ways. Trainees supported each other academically, socially, psychologically and emotionally. They shared resources, observed, evaluated, and reviewed each other's work, and provided mentorship. The recommendations of the study were that; Universities should establish learner support services in all provinces to coordinate and link learners to others doing similar programs.*

**Keywords**—*Influence; informal professional communities, quality, teacher professional communities, Open and Distance Learning, trainee teachers*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Training teachers using the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) pathway require active involvement and participation of the trainee. However, trainees under the ODL mode have limited contact time with the lecturers and their colleagues. At the most, they only have two weeks of residential school in a year. Despite the limited contact time, the trainees are expected to meet all the requirements of the course. However, critics of training teachers through ODL pathway have argued that two weeks of residential school is not adequate to prepare well-grounded and effective teachers. However, to achieve the best and gain the ethos, Open and Distance Learners have formed informal professional communities that serve as support groups. Lave (1991) call such communities with shared interests, and crafts as “communities of practice.” Wenger (1999) believed that “learning is fundamentally a result of social participation and that learning is both a kind of action and a form of belonging.”

It is these informal professional communities that the study focused on to explore their influence

on the ODL trainee teachers' mastery of content, pedagogical skills, and social skills needed for effective teaching.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Here, literature to the topic under study is made.

### *Definition of PLC*

Senge (1990) define a professional learning community as:

“A community of practitioners committed to results and continuous improvement, where everyone looks at outcomes, both promising and disappointing, to understand what they don't know and to ask how they can improve their own practice and help students achieve. These groups engage in dialogue, inquiry, and reflection for the purpose of collectively constructing new meaning and knowledge that result in action.”

This definition explains the background of PLCs. What is more is that the definition supports many others that look at PLCs as being aimed at employing an effective strategy to improve student achievement, professional learning communities are developed in very intentional ways.

### *Importance of PLC*

DuFour and Eaker (1998) contend that:

“The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This

process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.”

Educational researchers have extensively studied professional learning communities and their effects. Interestingly, they found that having strong professional learning communities in schools led to many positive cultural changes, including reduced teacher isolation, increased peer learning, increased content knowledge and increased knowledge of effective teaching strategies (Annenberg Institute, 2004; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Senge, 1990; Leana, 2011).

### *Defining characteristics and essential conditions for effective professional learning communities*

The worst and retrogressive aspect against PLCs is lack of trust. Even when PLCs are formed informally, they slacken in strength and growth due to misgivings among the members and the general populace. Many who shoot the progressive idea take it to be a money spinner. Contrary to such perceptions, Leana (2011) purports that at a high level, educational professional learning communities are collaborations that are characterized by trust and collegiality that are “data-informed, standards-driven, and focused on instruction, equity, and results.”

This paper contends that key structural conditions are not existent in many institutions of learning on the Copperbelt Province, which subsequently affect management and operation of PLCs. The authors of this paper recommend that structural conditions need to be put in place for professional learning communities to be designed and implemented in a sustainable manner. This viewpoint collaborates with the findings by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2000). Thus, there is need to set aside regular time for members PLCs to meet and talk. In addition, there is need to devise communication systems that should facilitate collaboration and learning among members.

## ***Characteristics of good PLC for teachers***

PLC should aim to:

- Be ongoing
- Be school-based and rooted in the knowledge base of teaching
- Be flexible and fit in with the natural rhythms of teaching
- Be collaborative and allow teachers to interact with peers
- Include opportunities for reflection and group enquiry into practice
- Be accessible and inclusive

## ***How technology supports Communication in PLC***

Email-based discussion groups

- Asynchronous
- Text-based

Enables/encourages

- Realistic problem solving
- Collaboration (individual & group)
- Making implicit knowledge explicit
- Broader participation

## ***Examples of PLCs in Zambia***

Today, school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) are vital in “building capacity” among teachers in diverse areas, including those with a subject focus. Some of these subject areas include Strengthening Mathematics, Science, Technology and Education (SMASTE); Programme for the Advancement of Girl Education (PAGE); New Breakthrough to Literacy (NBTL). Primarily, these were designed and promoted among already serving teachers and other taken for in-service teacher education. But there is a growing phenomenon of PLCs that is emerging in open and distance education institutions (ODL). One wonders how PLCs are sustained in ODL institutions.

PLCs have gained prominence within the general education community in Zambia. The formation of Teaching Practice (TP) is one of the examples. The introduction of TP is deep rooted

into the interest by educationists to improve student learning. The initiative collaborates with what research (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Schmoker, 2006) details as strides being made towards ensuring that professional learning communities have student learning as their principal focus.

The teaching practice (TP) workgroup was the first to be formed in Zambia and enjoys several years of collaborative work. In its early year, institutions of learning, spearheaded by the University of Zambia developed the teacher training model based on empirical methods. A school coordinator at every institution was often chosen to spearhead TP. Through these coordinators, it was easy to evaluate the implementation of TP. Institutions of learning thus used this data to determine which practices needed to be refined and made appropriate changes to the model for subsequent years. Without doubt, TP as evident on the Copperbelt Province is a true reflection of PLC, which houses students from different districts, learning levels (Primary Diploma or Degree, Secondary Diploma or Degree, Early Childhood Diploma or Degree) all sharing their experiences and activities. Notably, members of the PLCs willingly collaborate and examine their practices (both successful and unsuccessful). All this is done to improve their learning outcomes and teacher preparedness.

## ***How teachers use PLCs***

- Ask about tests, assignments and the examinations
- Talk about teacher professional issues
- Alert one another about prospective job posting in their field (upward mobility)
- Maintain contacts
- Mediated learning
- Share resources and ideas
- Not argue, or talk about computers

### III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Trainees studying under the ODL pathway have little contact time with lecturers and peers during residential school. As a result, critiques of the ODL model of training teachers argue that the quality of graduate teachers has declined, calling for measures to guarantee quality.

### IV. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The intention of this paper was twofold: firstly, to tell each PLC's story, particularly those on the Copperbelt Province, from the perspective of the lead teachers, and secondly to explore emerging themes of similarity and difference among the PLCs in the institutions of learning in the Province; explore how the PLCs are implemented and managed.

### V. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research were to:

1. Investigate the influence of Informal Professional Learning Communities on the quality of teacher training among Open and Distance Learners on the Copperbelt.
2. Identify challenges faced by ODL students in organizing Informal Professional Learning Communities.
3. Suggest ways of consolidating and strengthening Informal Professional Learning Communities.

### VI. METHODOLOGY

The study used a survey methodology to investigate six Informal Professional Learning Communities from six of the ten districts on the Copperbelt Province. It was qualitative in nature. This approach was appropriate because it accorded the researchers the rarest opportunity to collect lived experiences of both students and lecturers in realising PLCs. A total of 36 participants were sampled to take part in the study. These were selected using the simple random sampling method. The method gave equal chance to students to participate in the study. Three methods of data

collection were used, these were focus group discussions, interviews and questionnaire. Data coding and transcription preceded the thematic data analysis process.

### VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This subsection interrogates characteristics of effective professional learning communities in Zambia as well as in research literature. It triangulates findings of the interrogation and establishes gaps in the Zambian scenario of implementing PLCs.

One of the major findings was that informal professional communities had a big influence on trainees in a number of ways. Trainees supported each other academically, socially, psychologically and emotionally. They shared resources, observed, evaluated, and reviewed each other's work, and provided mentorship.

Findings further indicate several conditions which should be put in place in order to develop effective professional learning communities:

1. supportive and collective leadership;
2. shared vision;
3. structures to support collaboration;
4. reciprocal accountability through shared practice and
5. joint inquiry and resourcefulness.

The greatest challenge PLCs face in institutions of higher learning in Zambia are many, among them include lack of structures to support collaboration, lack of commitment among students, feeble linkages between students and lecturers to scaffold their infantile communication efforts.

The research findings showed that "when the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction – that is, when social capital is strong – student achievement scores improve."

Findings of this study suggest that a strong professional learning community is a powerful strategy for improving teacher effectiveness across schools. Administrators interviewed also reviewed that the more schools function as professional learning communities, the greater the gains in student learning and improved teachers' proficiency.

Participants revealed that despite having Ministry of Education tailored educational programs like strengthening Mathematics, Science and Technology Education (SMASTE), disparities in attitude and interest among potential students varied greatly. Very few were interested in studying the so called 'difficulty' subject areas (the mathematics, and science). However, they unanimously consented to the usefulness of PLCs in helping them comprehend seemingly 'grey' subject areas. According to them, lecturer-led PLCs stood the taste of time, compared to student led ones. In most cases, student-led PLCs were often biased, though very helpful too.

### **Participation in PLCs**

Participation in PLCs was said to be very instrumental in the members' day-to-day practices, as it influenced the success of learning. Unanimously, members of PLCs revealed the following:

*Each time we had group discussions, I learnt a lot and got good grades in my assignments and examinations. I don't regret ever joining the student groups. I belong to two study groups, segmented by subject areas. These study groups surround subject areas students think are difficult and thus join hands to study and tackle activities given.*

*My study group has really helped me a lot.*

### **Lecturers' Views of PLCs**

According to lecturers, opportunities to talk professionally with other adults are relatively uncommon in a teacher's typical environment (when alone all day long in a classroom with children). The importance of PLCs was unanimously echoed by teacher participants, the majority said that "PLCs accord students a rarest opportunity to share both theory and practicum on various subject areas they learn".

### **Learners' Views of PLCs**

The majority of respondents bemoaned the limited time in their busy schedules. Often times, they find it difficult to set aside time for communication and collaboration. Trust and honesty were said to be very rarest possessions primarily because professional learning communities revolve around building connections among members (students). These two provide the stamp on which professional learning communities entirely rest. In Zambia, there is a growing malpractice students engage into, were they copy assignments of one another. In many cases, they purely reduplicate them, changing cover pages only. This viewpoint is in tandem with the observation by Annenberg Institute (2004) that professional learning communities are different from other types of study groups in that they "require that group members [to] reflect honestly and openly together about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better and continually building their capacity to do so."

## **VIII. FUTURE RESEARCH**

1. Develop the formal and informal community of e-tutors
2. Explore the extent and existence of 'professional learning communities' in Zambia.

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