

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN LAHORE

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the current study was to analyse the perceptions of Higher Education Faculty's (HEFs) perceptions of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a means of professional growth. HEFs' responses to PLCs and their professional growth via PLCs were explored in depth. It was a qualitative study with a phenomenology study method. Five higher education faculty members (Male = 2, Female = 3) were selected through a purposive sampling technique from a private university in Lahore. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for the collection of data. The participants were face to face interviewed. For the data analysis, thematic analysis was performed, and themes were explained considering participants' responses. HEFs were aware of professional learning communities. HEFs were discovered to have a positive perception of PLC and explained how active collaboration with colleagues helped them grow professionally. It is recommended that higher education organisational leaders should implement PLCs to help the faculty grow professionally as; ultimately, it will enhance the quality of students' learning.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, Higher Education, Higher Education Faculty of Pakistan, Professional Growth.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers benefit from professional learning communities (PLCs) because they can cooperate with others and improve their own skills, which ultimately enhance students' academic achievement. Academics have studied professional learning communities' growth, functioning, and beneficial effects (Cheng & Pan, 2019). The implementation of professional learning communities varies widely, especially across developed and developing countries. The concept of PLCs is still relatively new in countries like Pakistan, where growth is still in its inception. Furthermore, various studies on PLCs in Pakistani schools have been undertaken (Harris et al., 2019). However, very scarce scholarly data is available on the utility of PLCs in Pakistan's higher education (HE). Hence, this study aims to explore the perceptions of the Faculty of Higher Education (HEF) of Pakistan about PLCs as a means of professional growth.

There have been several research studies on PLCs and effective professional growth in the international literature, and minimal research was found that evaluated teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of PLCs as a tool for promoting professional growth in the context of Pakistan at the Higher Education level (Ishii, 2017). The role of PLCs in education, their advantages, and the administrators' involvement in their creation and upkeep have all been the subject of several studies. Without appreciating

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the crucial part teachers play in defining a PLC's effectiveness and success, the value of a professional learning community cannot be fully understood.

As it is already mentioned, a research gap was found in the literature regarding how the faculty of higher education in Pakistan view professional learning communities as opportunities for professional growth. The goal of this study was to ascertain whether HEF thought PLCs offered valuable and on-going opportunities for professional growth or not.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section provides a literature review that incorporates the definitions, models, and advantages of PLCs in relation to education. PLCs have drawn a great deal of interest in educational research and practice as a way to encourage cooperation, increase teacher professional development, and raise student achievement. To give readers a systematic knowledge of the idea of PLCs, this review will look at some key academic papers, research studies, and theoretical frameworks. By synthesising the relevant literature, this study intends to clarify the many definitions and conceptualisations of PLCs, identify significant models and frameworks directing their implementation, and list the proven advantages of establishing and maintaining PLCs in educational settings.

Definitions of PLC

As the field of study has evolved over time, numerous academics and researchers have provided definitions of professional learning communities. For instance, Admiraal et al. (2021) claim that a setting where both kids and adults are interested in specific subjects and where everyone is so supportive of one another's learning comprises a learning community. A five-part concept of a professional learning community was presented by Sai and Siraj (2015). In a PLC, teachers work together as a group to satisfy the shared objectives of cooperating, sharing, reflecting, and attending to the unique needs of their students (Hord, 2004). In addition, Hord (2004) identified five elements of professional learning communities in schools: shared leadership, shared values and vision, group learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice. According to Kennedy (2016), a learning community is a cultural setting that fosters chances for social interaction while enabling students to learn to the best extent possible (Carpenter & Munshower, 2020).

Research demonstrates that PLCs substantially influence student achievement. For example, Harris et al. (2019) investigated how teacher preparation affected student achievement and found that PLCs have a significant impact on student achievement because they bring educators from throughout the district together to debate and plan courses, implement teaching strategies, and track student progress. Their investigation into PLCs adoption in schools in the US and Canada revealed that the impact on student outcomes increased with the level of adoption. School administrators frequently fall short of developing a framework that adequately supports teachers' professional growth.

A university that is genuinely committed to the idea of individualised student learning will apply rigorous and consistent methods when students are not learning. By coordinating evaluations and doing data analysis, schools and classrooms must develop a plan for continuous improvement and set priorities for results. This use of data emphasises a team approach to best practices research and continual growth (Brodie, 2021).

Models of PLC

PLCs have become an effective framework for fostering collaboration, encouraging teacher development, and improving student learning outcomes. Two important models—DuFour's and Hord's Models—among the many that have been proposed to direct the creation and growth of PLCs have made a considerable impact on the subject. An overview of these models is included in this section of the paper, along with a discussion of their main components, phases, and practical applications in the classroom.

DuFour's Model of PLC

According to DuFour (1999), the core of professional learning communities is the cooperation of the teachers. If teachers work more effectively together to handle challenging situations, they can help students close learning gaps so they can meet their learning goals. According to DuFour (2007), the PLC should prioritise learning above instruction, and cooperative work should primarily endeavour to increase each

person's level of accomplishment (DuFour, 2007). According to DuFour (2007), a learning community needs to have the following qualities: a shared vision, mission, values, and goals; a shared understanding of learning; a focus on learning as a way to create cooperative teams; the demand for realistic and practical qualities in cooperative teams; and a focus on action for members to achieve application.



Figure 1: Six Core Principles of PLCs (DuFour, 1999)

Hord's Model of PLCs

Hord (2004) identified five features or dimensions of professional learning communities: collaborative and supportive leadership, group creativity, shared values and vision, a standard set of personal practices, and conditions that promote the community's long-term success (Roy & Hord, 2006).

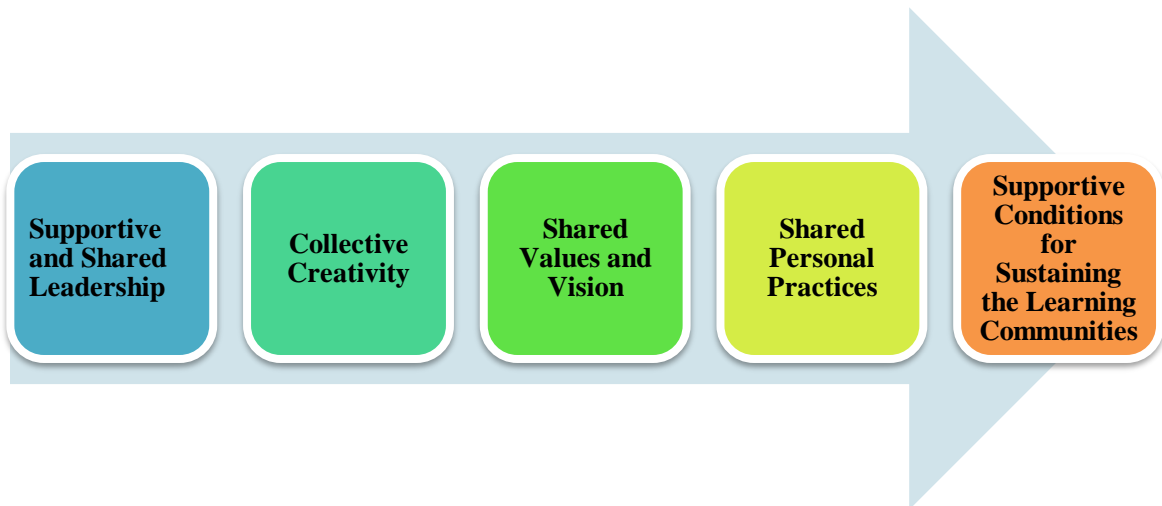


Figure 2: Five Dimensions of PLCs (Hord, 1997)

Practices of PLCs in Pakistan

There are not many research studies on professional learning communities in Pakistan, according to the search results. Some Virtual communities of practise (VCoP) and online professional networks for teachers, librarians, and other professions do exist, although they are not yet widely used. In addition, there is a scarcity of literature on PLCs in Higher Education, and most studies are in the school education contexts. For instance, Masood et al. (2020) found that the school PLC scenario in private schools is remarkable and well-established. They discovered that teachers at the private schools were aware of every quality that makes PLCs successful and that all key players were consistently working together to create PLCs.

In Gilgit Baltistan, according to Jan's (2014) study, some PLC components were more accessible to see than others. The elements that were most obvious were shared decision-making, collaborative learning, shared leadership, on-going professional growth, teacher empowerment, trust, and recognition. The least noticeable PLC components in the school were reflective thinking and an emphasis on student performance. Moreover, the information showed some positive aspects, such as a helpful headmaster and the availability of resources, as well as some negative aspects, like the building's limited size and the uncertainty of its financial support. Yet another study by Khan and Lammer (2017) found that English Companion Ning (ECN), an online community for English teachers, enhanced the professional growth of Pakistani university English teachers. The study's conclusions indicate that teachers' legitimate peripheral participation in the ECN gave them a chance to pick the brains of more knowledgeable community members and facilitated their assimilation into the ECN community.

Most studies on PLCs in higher education are found in the international context. For instance, Zhang and Liu (2019) found that while being unaware of its dimensions, many teachers in higher education thought that a large portion of their work at universities was part of a professional learning community. In addition, a study conducted by Goodyear et al. (2019) found that 82% of teachers believed in the leadership of their administrators and that they got continual support from their principals for both their own professional growth and the welfare of their students. They thought they could work together and make choices that were best for them. Moreover, in a study conducted by Ishii (2017), 77 % of teachers in public and private higher educational institutions were aware of the common goals and objectives of the institution. These institutions' staff members collaborate to create a shared set of values. A clear sense of purpose and a common vision for the school's future are shared by the professors and staff. Nevertheless, according to 23% of teachers, administrators set the school's shared vision, mission, and values without consulting the faculty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical underpinning of this study is social constructivism, which holds that social interactions and cultural environments play a role in the construction of knowledge and understanding. The study, which draws on the tenets of this theoretical viewpoint, seeks to investigate how people's perceptions and interpretations of social occurrences are influenced by their interactions with others and the larger social contexts in which they find themselves. The goal of the study is to analyse the perceptions of HEFs regarding PLCs as a means of professional growth.

According to Lev Vygotsky's theory, people actively contribute to the formation of their own knowledge forms the basis of social constructivism (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Vygotsky asserts that learning takes place primarily in social and cultural contexts rather than just within an individual (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Small groups and dyads are crucial in the social constructivist theory. Teachers encourage and support student learning by speaking naturally (Prenger et al., 2019). Social constructivism contends that discourse and human interactions are the foundation of good teaching and learning, with a focus on students' understanding of the issue at hand (Prawat & Floden, 1994).

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- (1) Analyse how HEFs define a professional learning community.
- (2) Analyse the perceptions of HEFs regarding PLCs as a means of professional growth.
- (3) Identify professional growth of HEFs through PLCs.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the qualitative research method and phenomenology research design (Langdrige, 2007) was used to explore the perspectives regarding the PLC of higher education faculty at a private university in Lahore. Researchers can gain a deeper understanding of their participants' viewpoints and recommend issues for future examination using a qualitative research technique. Moreover, phenomenology is the study of phenomena or the appearance of objects in people's experiences (Creswell, 2017). In the context of the study, the phenomenon under consideration is PLCs, and the purpose of the study is to understand the lived

experience of HEFs with PLCs. This research design was selected that could accommodate new themes and concepts evolving as a result of obtaining and evaluating data from the phenomenon because the primary focus was on the viewpoints of the teachers.

The higher education faculty of Pakistan was the study’s target population. Five HE teachers were interviewed in total. The research included three female and two male teachers between the ages of 27 and 44. A sample profile and demographic profile of the participants have been given in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Designation at the HE Institute
A	Male	28	M.Phil.	Lecturer
B	Female	36	PhD	Assistant Professor
C	Female	39	PhD	Assistant Professor
D	Male	27	M.Phil.	Lecturer
E	Female	44	PhD	Assistant Professor

Participants’ semi-structured face-to-face interviews enabled the study’s objectives to be attained. An interview guide that was semi-structured was used to question the participants. According to Levis et al. (2018), a semi-structured interview is conducted using an interview guide. For this study, an interview guide with deeper inquiries was used. Personal interviews were chosen because of their trustworthiness and convenience of usage. Because Participants and researchers could see one another, the researchers could assist individuals who were having trouble understanding the information within the interview questions.

In general, the hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenological analysis principles were followed during the data analysis process in this study. The researchers sought to provide a comprehensive and nuanced knowledge of the phenomenon under question by exploring the profound meanings and patterns hidden within participants’ lived experiences using an iterative and reflexive methodology.

The transcriptions of the interviews were carefully checked by the research team and later reviewed by two experts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). To ensure a thorough and unbiased study, the team included academics with experience in hermeneutic phenomenology and the interview method, as well as well-grounded knowledge in the field of PLCs. The data analysis followed the rules of interpretative reflection. To fully comprehend the participants’ stories, each interview transcript was initially read several times (Brinkmann, & Kvale, 2018). As a result of this procedure, some comments and first impressions were recorded. To find recurrent themes, patterns, and significant units within the data, the first researcher held reflective dialogues with other authors. Capturing the substance of participants’ experiences and the underlying patterns that shaped their attempts to make sense of the PLCs were the main goals.

A coding framework was created using the themes and patterns that had been observed (Saldaña, & Omasta, 2021). Segments of the data that represented meaningful units or concepts were given labels or codes as part of the coding procedure. The codes accurately reflected the participants’ experiences, and the researchers made sure they were based on the data. To create themes and sub-themes, the coded data were compiled and organised. For enhancing and validating the emergent themes, this method required on-going comparison and iterative analysis. The researchers engaged in conversations and self-reflexive dialogues to understand and make sense of the data, considering their own biases and prejudices. The researchers frequently consulted the original interview transcripts during the study to make sure the interpretations were faithful to the data and accurate. Through consensus and continual discussion within the research team, any differences or ambiguities in the analysis were clarified. Themes and sub-themes were then combined in the data analysis’s last step to creating a thorough understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The relationships between the themes were investigated, and the broad interpretations and conclusions that could be drawn from the information were also studied. By capturing the essence of the participants’ lived experiences of PLCs, the analysis’s conclusion provided a detailed description and interpretation of the participants’ experiences. As a result, the five main themes were constructed from the interview transcripts.

Strategies like ‘member checking’ and ‘peer debriefing’ (Creswell, & Poth, 2018) were used to make sure the study was trustworthy and rigorous. To make sure that participants’ points of view were appropriately reflected, member checking involves presenting the interpretations and findings to

participants for confirmation and comments. During peer debriefing, additional researchers with experience in hermeneutic phenomenology were consulted for feedback and critical analysis.

FINDINGS

The three main themes from the interview transcripts are listed below:

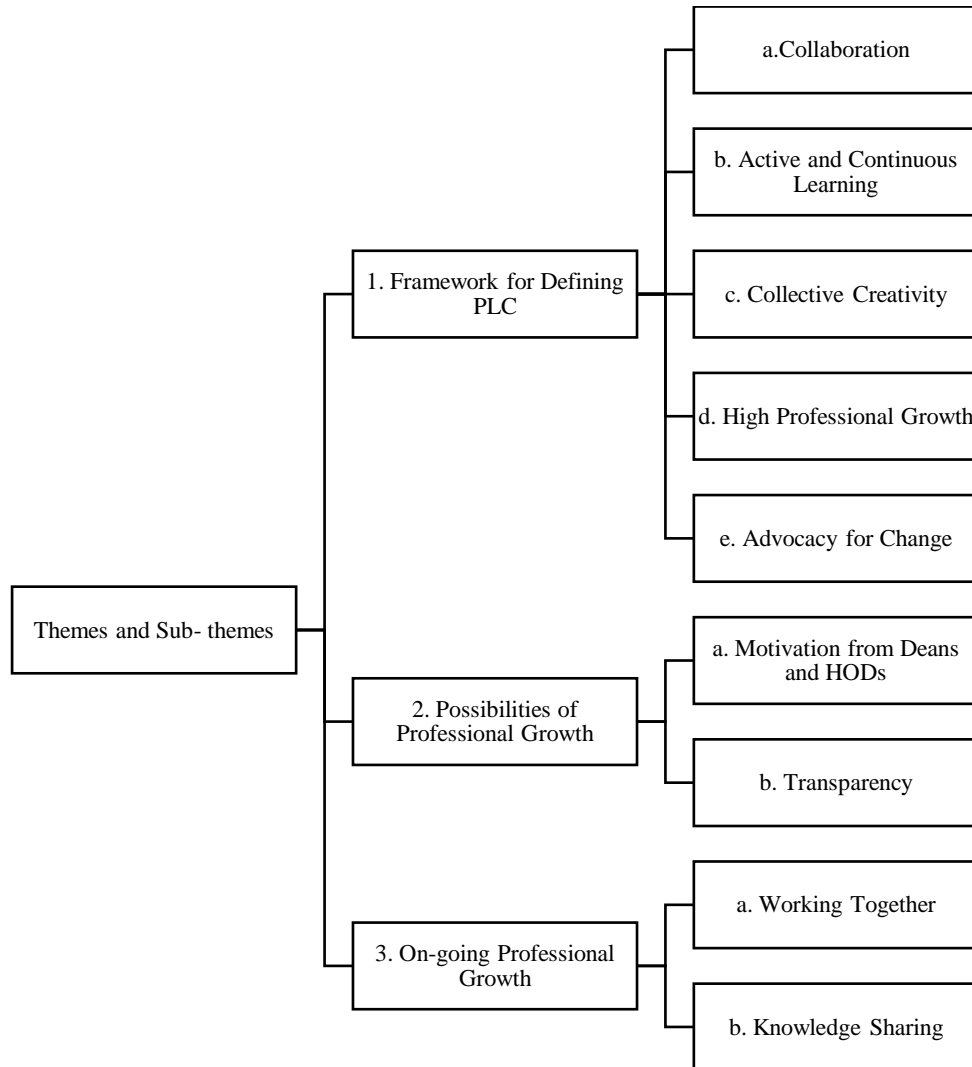


Figure 3: Themes and Sub-themes of this Study

These three themes (Figure 3) served as a framework for addressing the research objectives of this study. The research objectives of this study have been addressed by considering three identified main themes and the responses of the participants in the following sections.

The first research objective investigates how HEFs view professional learning communities in general. In other words, what HEFs think of PLCs is answered in this section with excerpts from individual interviews.

Framework for defining PLCs

This theme revealed the perceptions of participants about PLCs. This theme provided a framework for defining PLCs as perceived by the participants. The participants used different concepts to define professional learning communities, which are categorised into five sub-themes as follows:

Collaboration. The first framework category which was most prevalent in the participants' transcripts is collaboration. The participants used the concept of collaboration to define professional learning

communities. Participant C defined PLCs as “In Professional learning communities, a teacher is a student. And, I feel, such communities are those in which we continuously explore new strategies together to help our students achieve and how we may learn from one another.”

Active and Continuous Learning. This framework category was used as a concept to define PLCs by the participants. Active and continuous learning, according to the participants of this study, means the ongoing expansion of skills and knowledge for continuous professional growth. The participants defined PLC as a means of active and continuous learning. In this regard, participant A elaborated, “Being a part of a PLC is the best way to develop one’s abilities and learn continuously new skillsets from others.”

Collective Creativity. This framework category was also used to define PLCs. It means that creative ideas only emerge when shared and worked on collectively. The participants claimed that PLCs generate collective creativity in a way that when colleagues sit together and share their experiences, new creative ideas are generated. In this regard, participant E shared,

The staff becomes more unified through PLCs. We learn from each other a lot. I have felt recently that my ideas are more creative when I share them with my colleagues. So, I think PLC is an opportunity where we can be creative.

High Professional Growth. Participants used this framework category to define PLCs. They expressed that PLCs are a means of high professional growth. They further shared that participating in PLCs make them more organised and responsible. In this regard, participant B revealed, “When participating in a PLC, you must be organised and responsible; otherwise, you will not be able to contribute and complete your tasks.” Participants expressed that PLCs can only be successful when each member contributes fully.

Advocacy for Change. This framework category was used to define PLCs in a way that is a change promotion activity. Participants shared that PLCs champion its efforts towards making change happen. An advocate of change is someone or something that promotes effective changes and brings innovation, as per the participants. Participant D shared his experience of being a part of PLCs and expressed how participation in PLCs has made him flexible and adaptable to changes. He expressed,

I used to be really rigid about following the same patterns. Do not try to mend something that is not broken. I think I now have a fresh outlook on specific solutions that I had not before thought of. There is some recognition that there are other options besides my approach.

After creating a framework for the definitions of a professional learning community among the participants, the data analysis for the second research objective was done. The second objective is covered in the extracts from individual interviews in the next section. Following themes and sub-themes were identified during the data analysis of this subject.

Possibilities of Professional Growth

This theme revealed that participants see PLCs as a means of professional growth. They shared that PLCs helped them share ideas with one another, and also it enabled them to learn from the practices and experiences of others, which helped them to improve their teaching practices. In this regard, participant B shared, “It is just the amount of time we get to spend together and talk, whether it is about the book we are reading or the study group. I think the most important part of professional growth was just being able to talk about and evaluate what we do and need as professionals and how we can use it in the classroom.” It was revealed that PLC gives the participants an opportunity to spend time with other professionals, which gives them an opportunity for growth.

Motivation from Deans and HODs. This sub-theme was perceived by the participants as a possibility of professional learning communities through PLCs. The participants shared that there is no formal professional learning community initiatives by their heads. They further expressed that lack of leadership interest plays a massive role because lecturers and professors do not sit together and work on their professional growth as a team. In this regard, participant B expressed,

I believe if ardent support is provided by the HODs, then PLCs can be very beneficial. Right now, we are not obligated to be a part of any formal PLC, which is why not everyone grows professionally through PLC here.

Transparency. The participants shared that PLCs provide them with transparency which enables them to share their ideas and experiences openly without the fear of judgements. On this matter, participant C

expressed, “Without the professional learning community, I am not sure whether we would have collaborated or if I would have felt at ease talking to others about my work. In my opinion, transparency is essential in a professional learning group.” Similar to Participant C, Participant D shared the following words during the interview: “The PLC advised everyone that we must keep learning and developing as educators, particularly the new instructors. You will fall behind in the twenty-first century if you do not adapt to the changes and develop an open mind.” Furthermore, participant C shared, “Being open-minded in PLC gives them a chance to acknowledge the bright ideas of their colleagues. It brings to light the fact that there are other excellent methods in addition to mine.”

On-going Professional Growth

This theme revealed the perceptions of participants as to what extent PLC helps them grow professionally. Participants expressed that PLC provides continuous and on-going professional growth. So, there are always professional growth opportunities for them in PLCs. Participant E shared an example of professional growth during the interview:

Our research group made the decision to focus on educational policy. After that, we had a lengthy discussion on the book study chapter and what we had learned. We compiled a list of active message boards. We consequently had the chance to produce.

Working Together. This sub-theme revealed that the participants grew professionally by being a member of PLCs and working together with their colleagues. The participants put stress on collaboration through the interview sessions. They expressed the importance of professional collaboration for professional growth, which is provided by PLCs. In this regard, Participant A shared,

If we cooperate, we can make it happen. Working together, the participant exclaimed, “Hey, look what I made with it; wow!” All of us are going through a transformation at the same time. Together, we may learn and develop in amazing ways.

This perception was seconded by participant E as well in the following words, “It becomes obvious how you can fulfil your aim as fully as possible while collaborating with others.”

Knowledge Sharing. Participants considered knowledge sharing as a means of professional growth via PLCs. Participants expressed that when they shared knowledge with each other, they realised that there was much room for improvement professionally. This sparked motivation in them to improve further. Participant C expressed that “Teachers are motivated to set higher goals for themselves when they share knowledge with one another.” Similarly, participant D elaborated that when knowledge is shared among a group of professionals, it enhances their knowledge base, which gives them many opportunities to grow professionally, “Professional organisations, in my opinion, assist us in forming relationships and expanding our knowledge base. We only participate in educational activities to further our education and personal growth.” Participant A remarked, “To me, they seem to go hand in hand.” In essence, it was revealed by participants that working together and knowledge sharing during PLCs go hand in hand when it comes to professional growth.

DISCUSSION

As it is mentioned in previous sections, the HEFs’ perspectives on professional learning communities were not extensively covered by the literature in the context of Pakistan. HEFs were interviewed to find out what they believed about the importance of professional learning communities for both professional and personal growth. According to HEFs, institutionalising long-term educational transformation is the main objective of high-quality educational institutions. A crucial part of educational reform is HEF’s professional growth. According to Philpott and Oates (2017), the improvement plan is centred on professional progress. There are many ways, particularly PLCs, as per participants, that could use new information to improve them. One’s ability to recognise the necessity of educational change improves with professional growth.

The cornerstone for establishing the best possible learning environment for pupils is effective professional growth. Roy and Hord (2006, p. 10) claim, “Teacher quality is the most important predictor of student accomplishment.” As a result, educators need to take advantage of the best opportunities and strategies for teacher growth. The most practical strategy for long-term, significant educational growth, according to Dufour (2007), is to increase the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning

communities. Overall, the study's findings show that, in the opinion of higher education faculty, professional learning communities foster and support on-going professional growth.

The prevailing themes were consistent with Luyten and Bazo's (2019) definition of a professional learning community, which states that teachers work collaboratively to reflect on practice, examine the evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for specific students. Furthermore, the identified themes are also in line with Dufour's and Hord's Models.

CONCLUSION

According to the results of this study, teachers evaluate the possibilities for professional improvement in professional learning communities. The following concepts can help professional learning communities and professional growth: Some traits of a change agent are collaboration and peer support, Continuous Learning, Meaningful Learning and Enhanced Professionalism.

The threshold for higher education is established by teachers, HEFs should carry out efforts for their professional and personal growth that inspire and support lifelong learning. It is hoped that higher education officials will join the effort to create professional learning communities because of the study's findings. Teachers must receive professional growth within the framework and system of higher education. In higher education, professional learning communities offer the framework and support necessary to promote faculty professional growth and guarantee long-term institutional reforms.

In the area of faculty professional growth and professional learning communities in higher education, the findings of this study present a wide range of possible research subjects. Additional research in a variety of specialised field configurations and with more diverse student and staff demographics should be conducted to reinforce HEFs' perceptions of professional learning communities.

Furthermore, during the process, several participants underlined the importance of Deans and HODs and how they affected the success of the professional growth program. They stated that during the implementation phase, institutional leadership fostered a sense of accountability. The leadership qualities that had helped them become a professional learning community were also discussed by the participants. However, new insights for educational leaders may come from more studies on the role of the leaders in the sustainability of professional growth, implementation, and linkage with the effectiveness of professional learning communities. Researching the perspectives of other leaders in the field can be helpful for leaders who want to employ the structure of a professional learning community.

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