

ABSTRACT

Researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners have underscored the need for schools to become professional learning organizations, as leverage for school change in dynamic and often turbulent environments. In light of the call for greater interactive professionalism, the notion of the professional learning community (PLC) has come to the forefront of school change discourse. In contrast with the often prevailing pedagogical isolation experienced by autonomous teachers, particularly in secondary schools, the PLC is defined by networks of learning processes among its community members. Such networks aim to enable teachers to continuously interact and deliberate with one another on how to solve diverse problems related to teaching and learning.

Toward this goal of interactive professionalism, researchers and educators have attempted to transform the traditional “mechanistic” organizational perspective into a more collaborative perspective focusing on mutual knowledge exchange, where teachers coordinate their efforts in order to improve their students’ learning. Unfortunately, despite attempts to generate increased collaborative learning within schools, the majority of teachers today continue to learn primarily from their own individual and isolated experiences rather than from – and with – their peers. Although research has recognized the potential contribution of PLC for teachers, its sustainable development within schools remains uncertain.

The notion of PLC has been studied empirically in various educational contexts; however, importantly, no research to date has been conducted on PLC in special education schools. The purpose of the current study was to narrow this gap in the literature by exploring the notion of PLC in the realm of special education, along with its catalysts and barriers. As special education schools employ large multidisciplinary teams that cooperate to improve pupils’ academic, social, and behavioral achievements while working with highly challenging populations, it may be especially important to determine how teachers in this school context

can move away from isolated professional learning toward more collective types of thinking and sharing regarding the complex teaching/learning issues that they confront on a daily basis.

Thus, the current study comprised one of the first attempts to research the concept of PLC in special education. In particular, the study qualitatively explored the notion of PLC in two special education schools in Israel for children on the autism spectrum: the President School, a public elementary school with 73 pupils and about 90 staff members, and the Friendship School, a public secondary school with 87 pupils and about 110 staff members (school names are pseudonyms). This inquiry into two case-studies of PLC in special education schools aimed to explore how PLCs are manifested across two schools of similar size that both target a student population with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) but which differ in various characteristics such as the students' ages, the school's structure and philosophy, and the features of collaborative learning manifested in each institution. The study focused on how a range of multidisciplinary staff members in these two special education settings – including homeroom special education teachers, subject-matter teachers, teaching aides, paramedical professionals, applied behavior analysts, administrators, and others – collaborate on different levels. This examination of the nature of collaborative activity in the two special education schools, along with this activity's catalysts and barriers, aimed to contribute to a broader understanding of the phenomenon of PLC, thereby expanding the current state-of-the-art regarding collaborative learning to go beyond regular education systems and, in particular, to elucidate PLC efforts in special education schools working with the ASD student population.

Semi-structured interviews, observations, and document collection were conducted over a period of two years as means of examining the various professional learning groups operating at these two special education schools and the implications for school leadership. Two major research questions guided this data collection process:

- (1) What are the *facilitators* and what are the *impediments* of collective learning within the PLC framework in special education schools for pupils with ASD?
- (2) What is the *principal's role* in developing and sustaining PLCs in special education schools for pupils with ASD?

A total of 114 semi-structured interviews were held over the two years of data collection, tapping 31 interviewees in the President School and 26 interviewees in the Friendship School, each interviewed twice. The interviews were conducted with various types of position holders in the schools, including homeroom special education teachers, teaching aides, paramedical professionals, subject-matter teachers, and members of the administrative team. Interviews were held in the school or at the interviewee's or researcher's home. Each interview took approximately one hour and was audio-recorded for later analysis.

In addition, a total of 48 observations were performed in the two schools over the two years of data collection. Field notes were taken during pedagogical meetings in which the primary educational teams (consisting of teachers and teaching aides) met with the subject-matter teachers to discuss various issues regarding particular students. Field notes were also taken during sectorial meetings (e.g., only paramedical staff, or only teaching aides) that were held 4 to 6 times yearly in each school.

Finally, documents and artifacts concerning the teachers' learning process in both schools were collected from teachers and administrators over the two years, in order to further explore the PLC in each of the schools. These included collectively employed learning materials, meeting summaries, website information, and more.

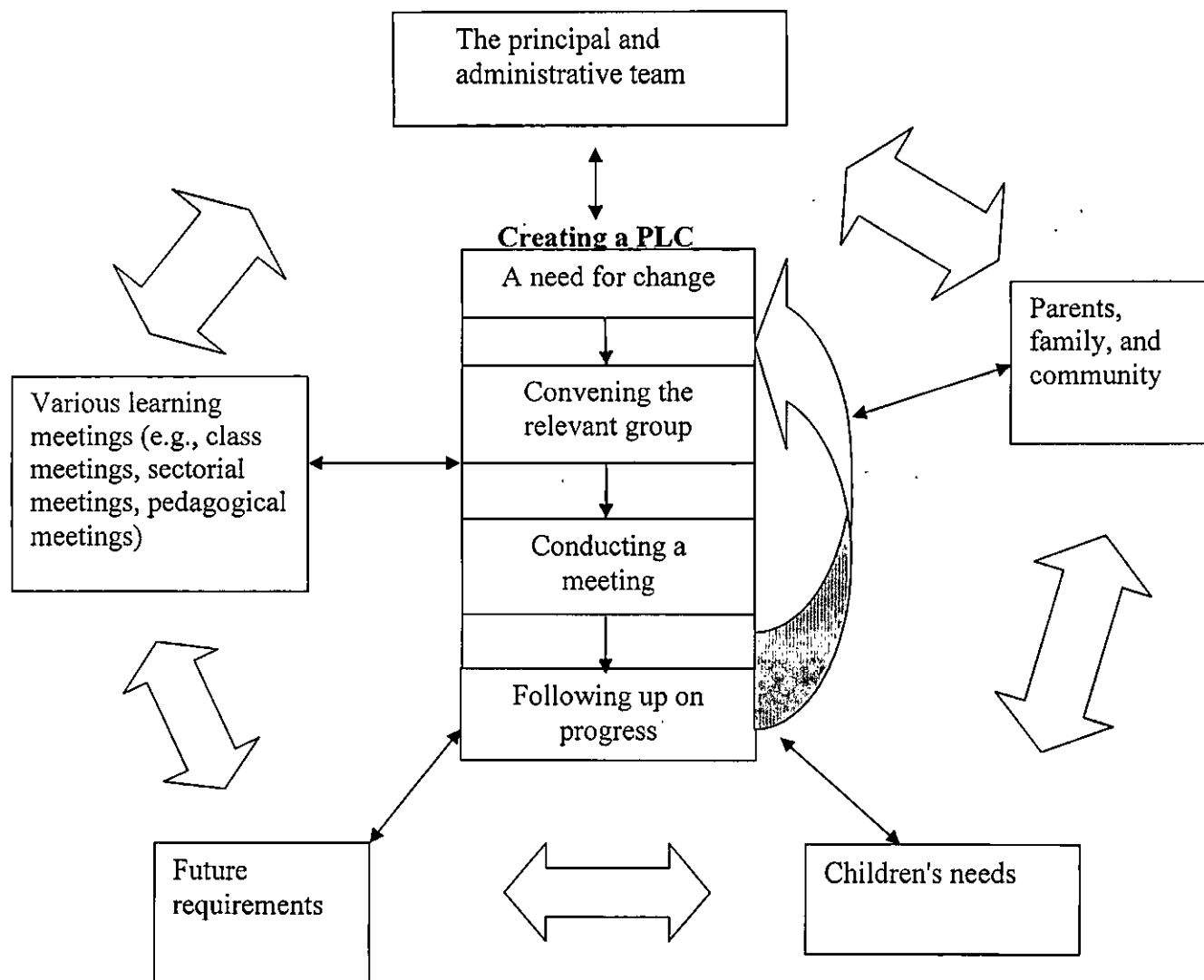
Altogether, the three data sources – transcribed interviews, field notes from observations, and documentation – underwent analysis and served as classic triangulation for this qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness and soundness of the study. Member

checking with all interview participants ($n = 57$) was conducted in order to reevaluate the data.

Data analysis yielded five major themes that interact in representing PLC in special education schools serving pupils with ASD. These themes were identified on the basis of the interviews, observations, and documentation, consisting of: (a) the notion of collective learning; (b) accountability for learning; (c) the school principal's role; (d) barriers to PLC; and (e) methods for promoting PLC. Although both schools examined in this study dealt with the same population, each school developed its own unique structures and learning culture. In both schools, the staff's professional learning forums were created in line with pupils' ages and level of functioning. The elementary school's structure and perspective influenced PLC implementation, and the secondary school found different professional learning routines more suitable to the ages and needs of its population.

Based on the findings, a model was proposed (see Figure 1) offering a schematic description of the interactions between the various members involved in the educational process of teaching children with ASD. PLCs in such environments require cooperation and continuous dialogue among members in order to help pupils achieve the optimal performance and well-being. The learning process must be constructed in ways that suit the needs of the pupils, families, and school staff, while concurrently maintaining flexibility. Therefore, a variety of different learning structures are used in creating the PLC framework for special education schools.

תרשים מס' 1: קהילה מקצועית לומדת בבתי ספר לחינוך מיוחד לתלמידים אוטיסטים



In light of the dynamic environment in special education, this perspective may be of major importance for assessing, developing, and sustaining PLCs in special education schools. The special education structure inherently necessitates continuous collaboration and communication between its various team members. In particular, the morning and afternoon primary class teams, each of which comprises two teachers and two teaching aides, must continually update each other and learn from each other. Furthermore, PLC constitutes a constructive way for school principals to learn from individuals within the school community and members of the community at large who possess knowledge that will benefit students in

special education. Thus, all staff members of the school can work together in planning, developing, and implementing a professional learning program. Moreover, local, state and nation-wide collaborative learning resources can be designed for the school principals and special education teachers.

While various aspects of PLC have been researched in this study, future researchers would do well to continue discussing many other aspects and implications of the subject in general, and in special education schools in particular. In other words, inasmuch as this study explored the process of PLC in the context of a specific population in special education – children, adolescents, and young adults with ASD – there is a need to broaden the research to other special education populations.