

‘I Never Walk Alone’: Rural School Teachers’ Lived Experiences of Professional Learning Community in Ghana.

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Abstract

The teaching profession has long been a lonely path because teaching is one profession characterised by extreme isolation. This is especially true in Ghana, where most teachers lack opportunities to discuss or share their work with colleagues in their schools. Participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCS) holds the promise of reducing teacher isolation by fostering collegiality, shared learning, and professional collaboration and support. This study explores the lived experiences of teachers in a rural school district in Ghana regarding the impact of PLC participation on their personal and professional practices. Specifically, the study examines how teachers conceptualise PLC, the perceived benefits and challenges, and structural changes needed to improve PLC implementation in Ghana. This qualitative study employs a descriptive phenomenological research design. Data were collected through a focus group discussion with 12 participants purposively sampled from a rural school district in Ghana. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data to answer the research questions. The findings show that rural schoolteachers have limited knowledge of PLC, which affects their participation. Furthermore, PLCs offer teachers innovative teaching methods, improved classroom management, and reduced isolation. However, initial issues such as short sessions, poor scheduling, inadequate facilitation and leadership, and insufficient supervision hinder the successful implementation of PLCS in Ghana. To enhance effectiveness, structural changes such as better scheduling of PLC activities and leadership programmes for schools and external facilitators are recommended. The Ghana Education Service managers must address these challenges to optimise the impact of PLCS on education and teacher learning. Implications of the study findings for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher isolation, Ghana, professional learning community, rural school and innovative teaching methods.

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1. Introduction

The teaching profession has long been a lonely venture simply because teaching is one profession that is characterised by isolation. To Sarason, teaching is a lonely profession because many teachers lack opportunities to discuss their work with other school personnel (Pratt & Holmyard, 2020). Similarly, Finders (1988) and Lottie (1984) attributed teacher isolation to the absence of shared practical knowledge and restricted opportunities for feedback, which contribute to the lack of a technical knowledge base in teaching. Pratt and Holmyard (2020) define teacher isolation as a situation in which teachers work in isolation from their colleagues without observing each other’s performance, sharing ideas, or working collaboratively. Davis (1986) observed that, however, teaching is highly interpersonal; teachers are often isolated from their colleagues for most of their working days, and professional interaction among teachers is frequently limited. Isolation seems to be widespread in public schools because they do not function effectively as collegiate institutions should (Davis, 1986). In a typical school setting in Ghana, most teachers refrain from sharing their successes or discussing their failures with their colleagues, fearing they will be perceived as inefficient or ineffective.

Pratt and Holmyard (2020) report that a study by the Gates Foundation in the USA found that only about 3% of teachers spend time collaborating with their colleagues. Most teachers plan, teach, and assess in isolation, which leads to less inspiring student experiences, inconsistent curriculum implementation, reduced commitment to the school, and a lack of innovation. The lack of daily informal interaction with other teachers increases teachers’ psychological isolation by limiting the opportunities for professional dialogue (Ferry & Westerlund, 2023; Makela & Whipp, 2015).

The potential effects of teacher isolation are undesirable and abundant. They include a lessening interest in one’s work (Ferry & Westerlund, 2023), burnout or stress (Davis, 1986), and a lack of community connection (Spicer & Robinson, 2021). Teacher isolation reduces teacher commitment, inhibits innovation, and is the principal reason for teacher attrition (Alonzo et al., 2024; Tompkins, 2023). Recent studies suggest that teachers are isolated in multiple ways, especially

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because they are the only adults in the classroom (Ontas, 2019; Spicer et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2024). Teachers are isolated by certifications, grade levels, core or elective classes, content, or building (Ferry & Westerlund, 2023). However, global research studies in education suggest that professional learning communities (PLCs) have the potential to reduce teacher isolation by fostering collegiality, shared learning, and professional collaboration and support (Battersby et al., 2015; Rolandson et al., 2022; Verdi, 2022).

2. Professional Learning Community

A professional learning community has gained global prominence in educational research and practice due to its potential to improve teacher wellbeing, instructional quality, and foster teacher learning and collaboration to reduce isolation. The supportive leadership and embedded practices within a professional learning community play essential roles in sustaining collaboration among teachers, thereby reducing feelings of isolation among teachers (Admiraal et al., 2019; Bautista et al., 2020). Research indicates that PLCs are particularly effective in decreasing feelings of isolation among teachers working in resource-constrained and rural environments by providing a platform for teachers to connect, share ideas and resources, and engage in other meaningful professional development activities (Knight, 2020; Stanley et al., 2024). PLCs are characterised by a collective commitment among teachers to engage in continuous professional learning and development that creates an environment conducive to collaboration (Hudson, 2024). The literature shows that PLCs address teacher isolation by promoting collaboration through various mechanisms, including shared leadership, mutual trust, and reflective practice (Stoll et al., 2006; Zhang, 2022). Mydin et al. (2024) highlight that PLCs not only encourage peer collaboration, facilitate knowledge sharing, and best teaching practices among teachers, but also enhance teachers’ innovative capacities to deliver high-quality teaching and learning. Khasawneh et al. (2023) also emphasise that teacher collaboration within PLCs leads to significant professional growth and the development of a culture of continuous learning and improvement in schools. They further note that the collaborative activities characteristic of PLCs offer teachers valuable opportunities to learn from one another, a vital component for

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enhancing their effectiveness and reducing isolation and burnout. Additionally, some studies (Ahmed 2015; 2023; Khasawneh et al., 2023) stress the importance of reflective practice within PLCs to strengthen teacher collaboration and lessen feelings of isolation. Most teachers participating in PLCs often engage in reflective dialogues that enable them to examine their professional practices and learn from their experiences. Pan (2023) and Sari et al. (2018) observe that the reflective process associated with PLCs is essential for fostering a collaborative culture where teachers feel safe to share their challenges and successes, thereby improving their collective efficacy and reducing feelings of isolation. Ahmed (2015) also notes that the continuous cycle of inquiry and reflection inherent in PLCs promotes a shared sense of responsibility among teachers, making it crucial for sustaining collaborative efforts in schools to reduce teacher isolation and enhance learning outcomes.

It is in this light that the National Teaching Council (NTC), the regulatory body mandated to professionalise teaching in Ghana, has instituted PLC to help teachers learn together, share knowledge and experiences, reduce isolation and foster collaboration. The PLCs in Ghana also aim to enhance teacher professional practices to improve students’ achievements in their schools. PLC sessions are held weekly in all public primary and secondary schools across the country. Teachers are required to incorporate the experiences gained from the weekly PLC sessions in their daily lessons to enhance students’ learning. Until PLCs were introduced in Ghanaian schools, teachers remained separated and isolated in their classrooms. Employing a professional learning community could help reduce isolating teaching practices and foster teacher collaboration to enhance learning outcomes and achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG#4: Quality education) in Ghana. Since the initiation of PLCs in Ghanaian schools, there has been little or no attempt to study teachers' lived experiences regarding how PLCs are facilitated in schools and their relevance and challenges with the overall goal of improving and sustaining PLCs in schools. PLC research in Ghana is under-explored, especially qualitative studies that explore teachers' lived experiences of PLC. Studies on PLCs are mostly carried out in the USA, China and Europe. A few studies in Ghana, such as Dampson (2021), have quantitatively assessed the effectiveness of

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PLCs in five regions in Ghana, whereas Yidana and Acquah (2024) tested the influence of PLC on the self-efficacy of economics teachers. Hence, the present study explored teachers' lived experiences of PLCs in a rural school district in Ghana to fill the research gap, improve PLC practices and participation, and add to the global literature. The following research question guided the study: (1) How do teachers conceptualise PLC in Ghanaian schools? (2) What perceived benefits do teachers derive from PLC participation? and (3) What challenges do teachers perceive to hinder the implementation of PLCs in Ghana? The study's outcome may be valuable and contribute to shaping, addressing, and sustaining PLC operations in pre-tertiary education in Ghana.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

The study utilised a descriptive phenomenological research design to examine and describe rural schoolteachers lived experiences of professional learning community participation. According to Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019), descriptive phenomenology describes the essence of phenomena as experienced by the participants and setting aside the assumptions and preconceived ideas of the researcher(s) through a process called bracketing. This design was considered well-suited for the study, which aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of teachers in PLC participation rather than measuring variables.

3.2 Participants and Setting

Twelve participants were recruited from a rural school district in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The researchers reached out to the district directorate of education, which approved an invitation for teachers in the districts to participate in the discussion. The participants included 12 teachers from public kindergartens, primary schools, and junior high schools. The twelve participants were chosen in line with Kruger's (2014) recommendation that the number of participants in a focus group discussion should be between 10 and 12 to ensure a diversity of viewpoints, while also avoiding a disjointed or chaotic situation. Four participants were selected from each level of basic education based on their relevance to the research enquiry and their capacity to provide different perspectives on the research problem.

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The participants were selected through convenience sampling, based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Approximately 58% of the participants were females compared to 42% males. Many of the participants held a bachelor's degree, while only a few had a Diploma in Basic Education. Their ages ranged from 24 to 35 years, indicating a relatively healthy teaching staff. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 14 years.

The study site was chosen because it is one of three model school districts in Ghana that are piloting professional learning communities. The Ghana Education Service, supported by Transforming Teaching, Education and Learning (T-TEL), has trained curriculum leaders to facilitate weekly PLC sessions and submit weekly reports to a national data dashboard. Teachers have been provided with a PLC resource book to guide PLC sessions. Teachers are also expected to integrate what they learn at PLC meetings into their daily instructions. The above characteristics made the study site well-suited for the study.

3.3 Data collection

Data were gathered through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with a view to delving into the teachers’ lived experiences of PLC. A focus group discussion was chosen because it facilitates participatory discussions among participants and yields comprehensive and detailed insights into the study problem (Halliday et al., 2021; Nyumba et al., 2018). An FGD was held at a location and time chosen by the participants. The FGD was held in person and facilitated by the author, with a research assistant observing and taking written notes. The author audio-recorded the FGD session and took written notes during the moderation. The interview was semi-structured and guided by a prearranged list of questions. The researcher facilitated the FGD by directing the topic of discussion and ensuring that each participant had an opportunity to speak. The FGD session was held with 12 participants, consisting of 7 females and 5 males, at a cosy location within the study site. To enrich the discussion and ensure a diversity of viewpoints, the participants were drawn from a variety of educational settings within the district. Specifically, the group comprised four teachers from public kindergarten schools, four from primary schools, and four from junior high schools. This selection was intentional to provide a broad spectrum of perspectives representative of the different stages within basic education. The ages of the

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participants ranged from 24 to 35 years, reflecting a relatively young and dynamic teaching workforce. With teaching experience spanning between 2 and 14 years, the group included both early-career and more seasoned educators. This mix contributed to a richer discussion by allowing for the sharing of insights from varying lengths of professional experience.

The facilitator created room for flexibility, which enabled participants to openly share their thoughts, experiences, and attitudes during the focus group discussion held in a relaxed and informal setting. Before the session, each participant signed a consent form and was briefed on the study’s purpose. They were also assured that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The FDG session lasted for about 2 to 3 hours.

3.4 Data analysis

The audio recordings from the FGD session were transcribed electronically using Otter.ai. The researcher listened to the recordings multiple times to ensure that the speech-to-text transcription from Otter.ai accurately reflected the participants’ views and experiences. The interview transcripts were sent to some participants who volunteered to review them for accuracy. Once the participants confirmed the transcripts, the researchers applied Braun and Clarke’s (2019) five-stage thematic analysis framework to identify the final themes.

The dataset from the FGD was manually analysed. First, the researcher familiarised himself with the dataset by reading it thoroughly multiple times and noting recurring phrases, expressions of feelings, tone, and emotions of the participants. Secondly, the researcher generated the initial codes by identifying features of the dataset that were interesting across the dataset (e.g., collaborative practice, benefits, facilitation, challenges and improvement) and organised them relevant to each code. Third, the initial themes were constructed by collating codes into potential themes. Later, all relevant data were gathered for each theme and the relationships between codes and themes. Fourth, the researcher reviewed the themes by checking whether they aligned with the code extracts and the full dataset. The themes were refined by merging and discarding some, while ensuring that each theme remained distinct. Finally, the researcher refined and named the themes by conducting a detailed

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analysis of each theme and defining the purpose of each to ascertain if they capture their scope and meaning. In all, four themes emerged, including (1) conceptualisation of PLC, (2) the benefits of PLC, (3) challenges affecting PLC and (4) structural organisation to improve PLC. Some excerpts representing these themes have been identified and selected to highlight the key findings in the paper.

4. Results

The thematic analysis reveals practical insights into the important role that professional learning communities play in teachers’ personal and professional development within the context of rural school settings in Ghana. One seasoned teacher claimed that PLC offers collaborative support and minimises teacher isolation. His assertion was used to frame the study title: “*With PLC, I never walk alone*”. He believes that PLC offers teachers more opportunities to work together than other professional development activities that prioritise individual teachers’ needs and achievements.

The study’s findings are organised around four interrelated themes captured during the focus group discussion. Each theme reflects rural schoolteachers lived experiences and perceptions of PLC. The themes are discussed in the following sections with unique representations of comments to illustrate them.

4.1 Conceptualisation of PLC

Most of the participants believe that PLC is a collaborative avenue where teachers meet to share ideas, discuss school-related issues and address their weaknesses, and learn to enhance their teaching, learning and assessment practices. The participants claim that they learn through reflections and collaboration to improve teacher practices and student learning.

For example, a teacher is quoted as saying, “*To me, PLC is a kind of workshop where teachers meet to share their learning with colleagues. This helps teachers improve their classroom teaching, learning and assessment*”.

Similarly, another teacher also explains PLC as “*a system for professional teachers to learn modern teaching methods*”.

Most of the teachers believe that PLC is a new concept in the teaching profession where teachers meet regularly to discuss issues relating to

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their teaching tasks. At the same time, they try to put in some interventions to address those issues collaboratively.

One female kindergarten teacher claims that *“hmmmm, PLC is a new approach that is happening to the teaching profession. It is a collaborative effort among teachers in a school to enhance whole-school learning and solve difficulties faced by the students”*.

It can be deduced from the FGD that most teachers have some basic understanding of PLC, and that serves as a reference point for their weekly participation in PLC sessions.

4.2 Benefits Associated with PLC Participation

When sharing their views on PLC, the teachers indicated that they benefit in one way or another from PLC participation. They believe that PLC participation has improved their confidence in instructional planning and development, classroom assessment, instructional differentiation and classroom management. They assert that PLC promotes quality teaching and learning and enhances student learning outcomes in schools.

Specifically, they believe that PLC enhances their confidence and teaching skills. PLC participation has enriched their teaching skills and developed their confidence in teaching.

A Kindergarten teacher indicates that *“as a KG teacher, the PLC sessions have helped me to acquire more knowledge in teaching. I knew it already, but I was not applying it”*

A teacher stated, *“Oh yeah, it has helped me in many ways. I was the type who couldn’t go to my colleagues for help unless I searched for it myself. Sometimes, when I check, I don’t get the actual information that I want, but during PLC sessions, we discuss many things and eventually get my issues fully discussed”*.

The participants believe that PLC promotes teacher collaboration and reduces teacher isolation. They assert that it has allowed them to work together than ever in their schools. They believe that they are more eager to welcome their colleagues to their individual classrooms for lesson observation to improve their personal and professional practices.

A seasoned teacher had this to say, *“With PLC, I never walk alone”*. My colleagues have become my support system, and we work together to address our own issues all the time”.

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Another teacher also remarked that “every *teacher in our school wants to work with others, unlike previously, where each one was to himself, God for us all*”.

Once again, most teachers believe that participating in PLCs has helped them acquire new teaching methods, pedagogical strategies, and classroom management techniques to improve their teaching and learning interactions in the classroom.

A teacher asserted that “*I didn’t know anything about differentiated instruction and assessment. Through PLC, I know it is a method used to differentiate children’s abilities and address diversity appropriately*”.

A primary school teacher indicated that “I can handle my pupils’ misbehaviour appropriately without using canes (beating) or insulting words. I learned this from a recommendation a colleague gave after observing my lesson”.

The findings, supported by the extracts, suggest that the rural schoolteachers admit that PLC participation has benefited them immensely.

4.3 Challenges Associated with PLCs

The majority of the participants perceived PLC as a good learning platform for teachers. However, they identified some teething problems which, when addressed, could lead to the effective implementation of PLC in Ghanaian schools.

The teachers indicated that structural challenges, such as teaching workload and insufficient time and scheduling of PLC activities for teachers to engage in collaborative learning practices, were some of the major challenges they faced with PLC implementation.

A teacher summed the scheduling of PLC activities in their schools with this observation: *‘To me, the timing is wrong, coupled with limited resources and handbooks’ (Speaker 8)*

Similarly, the teachers intimated that the informational barrier is a major challenge to the implementation of PLC in Ghana. It appears that most teachers in Ghana lack an adequate understanding of the principles and practices of PLC. One teacher remarked:

‘Hmmmmm, the rationale behind the PLC should be adequately explained to the teachers to embrace it wholeheartedly. As it stands, some of us view it as an additional responsibility. Some think that it’s

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a new way to find fault with teachers due to the current arrangement, whereby absentee teachers are said to be penalised.

The teachers in Ghana identified a lack of motivation to engage in PLCs as a major setback to PLC implementation. The teachers feel that they are not motivated enough to engage in PLCs. They are of the view that when PLC facilitators or curriculum leads are invited to workshops and seminars, they are accommodated in decent hotels, provided with meals, and paid a per diem. However, teachers in the schools are not compensated for the time and resources they commit to PLC participation. There are no funds in the schools to implement weekly PLC activities.

A teacher indicated that *‘The leaders aren’t motivating us. I suggest that some funds should be set aside to motivate us at least every term (speaker 5).*

The majority of the teachers believe that ineffective facilitation of PLC sessions is among the major challenges confronting the successful implementation of PLC activities in Ghana. The teachers believe that their PLC facilitators or curriculum leaders often provide ineffective facilitation, which makes PLC sessions dull and unengaging.

For instance, one teacher intimated that *“some of the internal facilitation could be boring, which makes the PLC participation not encouraging”.*

The teachers acknowledged that PLC is a platform for teachers to learn and improve their personal and professional skills, thereby enhancing student learning. They affirmed the critical role of facilitation in ensuring the success of any PLC implementation. They believe that without effective facilitation, PLCs may not provide the necessary conditions for teacher collaboration and empowerment.

The rural schoolteachers identified the ineffective implementation of PLC activities in most basic schools in Ghana with leadership. They believe that school heads lack the needed leadership to lead, enforce, and sustain PLC activities in their schools. For example, one teacher *pointed out that:*

“Our school leaders often do not support PLC coordinators, leading to challenges in maintaining the sessions”.

A teacher in a rural school setting had this proposal for his school leadership:

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“I propose that school leaders should monitor and supervise PLCs effectively to ensure their success”.

4.4 Structural Organisation to Improve PLC Participation

The teachers offered suggestions for improving and sustaining PLC activities in Ghana schools because they feel it is a good platform for teachers to learn to improve their personal and professional practices. First, they intimated that they should be properly oriented on the principles and practices of PLC. They believed that proper orientation would enlighten them on the rationale, purposes and key benefits of PLC to engender active participation.

A teacher has this to say: *“Hmmm! The rationale behind PLC should be properly explained to the teachers to embrace it wholeheartedly”.*

Again, the teachers feel that better scheduling of PLC activities would improve teacher involvement and participation. They believe that the managers of the Ghana Education Service should plan to allow teachers the opportunity to schedule their time for PLC activities or incorporate their concerns into the scheduling of these activities.

A teacher remarked that: *‘the overall organisation and timing of the PLC ought to be properly re-examined to incorporate the teachers’ concerns’ (Speaker 7).*

Similarly, the rural schoolteachers believe that PLC facilitation could be improved by adequate training and preparation and the provision of resources to the facilitators.

A teacher remarked that *“So I am of the view that the topics ought to be given to the facilitators ahead of time to enable them to do proper preparation” (Speaker 4).*

A female teacher believes that: *“a facilitator who is well-prepared and can lead the discussions effectively”.*

They believe that external facilitators could be utilised to supplement the efforts of the curriculum leads in their schools. They all seem to agree that external facilitators are more experienced than their curriculum leads and promote active participation.

A teacher feels that *“an officer from the office was invited to enhance the PLC, and the teachers paid more attention when the officer facilitated”.*

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A primary school teacher admitted that *“we invited a facilitator from the office to lead a PLC session, and it was more time-conscious and enjoyable”*.

The participants agreed that external facilitators enrich PLC sessions with their expertise by promoting active engagement and introducing new ideas and insights. They also agreed that effective facilitation is a critical feature within PLCs that can contribute to teacher collaboration, transformative learning and eliminate unhealthy practices.

Additionally, the teachers feel that there should be effective supervision of PLC activities in schools. Effective supervision. Effective supervision of PLC activities seems crucial to the success and sustainability of PLCs in schools, as they help to drive collaboration, reflective practice and improve teacher performance.

A teacher remarked that *“I suggest that school leaders should monitor and supervise PLCs effectively to ensure their success”*.

The teachers believe that supervision will help create a supportive environment, meaningful collaboration to enhance teacher engagement and improve the effectiveness of PLCs in Ghanaian schools.

The teacher also suggested that school leaders should incentivise them to engage in PLC activities. They believe that with adequate motivation, incentivise them to engage actively and sustain their involvement in PLCs and benefit from collaborative learning and practices.

For instance, one teacher remarked, *‘They should also motivate teachers to fully participate in the PLC sessions’ (Speaker 8)*.

Lastly, the teachers believe that leadership is key to improving and sustaining PLC activities in their schools. They particularly mentioned that there should be capacity-building programs to hone the leadership skills of school managers, enabling them to sustain PLC activities in their schools.

A teacher remarked, *‘I suggest that our school heads need to be educated on the importance of PLCs and their role in supporting them’ (Speaker 6)*.

The teachers also affirmed that leadership is essential in integrating PLC activities into school routines and ensuring their sustainability over a long period of time. The exemplary leadership could also help

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align PLC activities with school improvement plans that lead to active involvement, participation and commitment of teachers in PLC.

5. Discussion

The study explored the lived experiences of rural schoolteachers in PLC participation in Ghana. The findings of the study are organised around the four interrelated themes captured during the focus group discussion: conceptualisation of PLC, perceived benefits of PLC, challenges associated with PLCs and structural organisation to improve PLC.

The findings clearly show that the rural schoolteachers had a basic knowledge of a professional learning community, which serves as a reference point for lesser participation in weekly PLC sessions in their schools. This finding aligns with recent studies that indicate that limited understanding of PLCs can potentially decrease teachers’ active involvement and engagement (Brodie, 2019; Chuang et al., 2023; Prenger et al., 2019). The findings suggest the need for the management of the Ghana Education Service to improve rural schoolteachers’ knowledge of PLCs. Clarifying and improving teachers’ knowledge of PLCs will not only improve their participation and engagement (Grimm, 2023; Wing et al., 2023) but also lead to positive changes in their attitudes, beliefs and teaching skills (Alhanachi et al., 2021).

Again, the teachers recounted the benefits they have accrued from participating in PLC. They believe that it has reduced teacher isolation and improved collaboration. These findings are consistent with previous studies that demonstrated the potential of PLC participation to reduce isolation (Ahmed, 2015; Khasawneh et al., 2023) and enhance teachers’ collaborative skills (Stoll et al., 2006; Zhang, 2022). Again, the participation in PLC activities improved teachers’ confidence in teaching. This finding is supported by a substantial body of research indicating that PLC increases teacher self-efficacy and commitment to teaching (Kelly et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022; Zonoubi et al., 2017; Yidana et al., 2024). The finding suggests that school leaders should prioritise strengthening PLC participation in their schools to boost teachers’ confidence and improve instructional quality. Lastly, the teachers’ participation in PLC has dramatically improved their pedagogical skills and classroom management

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practices. This finding is greatly supported by global research that states that involvement in PLC improves teachers’ pedagogical skills through collective learning and application, and sharing of innovative teaching practices. For instance, Ohayon (2023) reported a study that teachers’ engagement in PLCs led to improved lesson planning, preparation, and usage of teaching resources and the adoption of child-centred pedagogical strategies. In another study, Thompson et al (2019) reported that PLC participation not only enhanced teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge but also enabled them to plan and execute quality instruction to improve student learning. Darajat et al. (2024) also observed that participation in PLCs offers an avenue for teachers to deliberate and address classroom management challenges in their schools. Dautova (2020) noted that when teachers participate in PLC sessions, they not only seek to improve their classroom management skills but also develop the ability to create a positive learning environment that stimulates students' learning. This finding underscores the need for a concerted effort to strengthen PLCs in Ghanaian schools to help teachers improve their classroom management skills by sharing best practices.

Additionally, the study reveals several challenges hindering the successful implementation of PLCs in rural schools in Ghana. Notable among them are structural challenges, such as teaching workload and insufficient time and scheduling of PLC activities for teachers to engage in collaborative learning practices. The findings suggest that teachers are not enthused with the scheduling, resources, and provisions made for the implementation of weekly PLCs in their schools. These findings are consistent with several studies in other contexts (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Botha et al., 2022; Plank et al., 2023). In these studies, the authors also identified rigid timetables, inadequate administrative support, insufficient time, and lack of dedication to PLC activities as some of the structural challenges that hinder PLC implementations. The findings highlight the need for flexibility and better scheduling of PLC activities to meet the growing needs of teachers.

The study also identified the information barrier as one of the key challenges affecting PLC implementation. It appeared that most teachers lack adequate understanding of the principles, practices, and value of PLC in Ghana. The findings are consistent with a similar

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Ghanaian study that most basic schoolteachers have insufficient knowledge and skills on PLC (Dampson 2021). The findings are consistent with several studies in other contexts that found that most teachers lack adequate knowledge, training, and understanding of the purpose, principles and practices that usually lead to ineffective implementation (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Botha et al., 2022; Plank et al., 2023). When a significant number of teachers lack in-depth knowledge about PLCs, it may lead to a lack of dedication to PLC activities and their sustainability. There is therefore a need to enhance teachers' understanding of PLCs through workshops and seminars to improve their participation.

The study revealed that a lack of motivation hinders the successful implementation in rural schools in Ghana. The teachers feel that they are not motivated enough to engage in PLCs. The teachers in rural schools lament that they are not compensated for the time, efforts and resources they commit to PLC participation, which explains their reluctance and unwillingness to participate in PLC activities. The findings are consistent with a similar study in Ghana by Dampson (2021), who found that most teachers in basic schools are reluctant to attend PLC meetings, whilst those who participate in the meetings demonstrate apathy in sharing insights to enhance the PLC discussions. The findings are supported by previous studies in other contexts, which indicate that motivational barriers are essential challenges to PLC implementation (Chau et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2022). This therefore suggests that teachers must be motivated, feel safe and valued in their contributions to participate and enhance PLC discussions. PLC participation should be made a critical requirement for the promotion and renewal of the teacher license.

The study revealed that PLC participation is hindered by ineffective facilitation in rural Ghana. Most teachers believe that their PLC facilitators or curriculum leaders are ineffective, which makes PLC sessions boring and unengaging. It is noteworthy that, even though the curriculum leaders in rural schools may have received training and resources for PLC facilitation, there is a tendency that most of them do not prepare adequately before PLC facilitation. The lack of preparation may impact the effectiveness of weekly PLC sessions, as facilitators who do not prepare well may struggle to nurture meaningful learning opportunities for teachers. Without adequate

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preparation, facilitators may struggle to lead discussions effectively, address the needs of teachers or create a conducive learning environment to foster teacher professional growth. In this case, it may make PLC sessions dull and unengaging, as the teachers alluded to. This finding is extremely important because it builds on existing research studies that indicate effective facilitation is essential for PLCs’ effectiveness, robustness and sustainability (Adeoye et al., 2023; Chauraya & Brodie, 2018; Sholeh et al., 2023). Effective facilitation is required to create opportunities for meaningful teacher learning through continuous professional communication and collaboration (Sholeh et al., 2023). This finding suggests the need to build the capacity of curriculum leaders regularly to deliver on their mandate. It is also important to enrich weekly PLC sessions with external facilitators to boost participation and augment the efforts of the curriculum leaders.

Lastly, the study revealed that poor leadership in rural schools affects PLC implementation. The teachers admitted that the rural schools lacked leadership in planning and providing the required support and resources for teachers to engage meaningfully in PLC activities. The poor leadership of school heads could be partly attributed to the fact that, perhaps most of them had received little or no training to hone their leadership skills upon assumption of leadership roles in schools. It could also mean that they had not been properly oriented on their essential roles toward the establishment, improvement and sustaining of PLCs in their schools. The findings of this study add to existing evidence that leadership within schools is a critical factor influencing the success of PLCs (Utomo & Ming, 2023; Sholeh et al., 2023; Wang, 2016). School leaders who effectively and actively participate in PLCs create conditions that boost teacher engagement and promote a culture of trust and collaboration in their schools. Evidence also shows that school leadership significantly influences how a school becomes a PLC (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Carpenter, 2015; Botha et al., 2022; Plank et al., 2023, 2023). They believe that leaders with strong beliefs and dispositions influence teachers’ participation in PLCs, leading to improved teacher learning and student outcomes. Given the essential role of leadership in fostering and sustaining PLCs, the management of the Ghana Education Service must update the leadership skills of school leaders so that they can create the

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necessary conditions, structures and culture to strengthen and sustain PLCs in their schools to impact teacher learning, thereby improving student learning outcomes.

6. Conclusions

The study concludes that teachers in rural schools have limited knowledge and understanding of professional learning communities, and this greatly constrains their active participation in weekly PLC sessions in Ghana. This limited conceptual understanding potentially decreases the opportunities for collaboration, shared reflection, collective learning, and application and pedagogical innovation, which are considered core elements of effective professional learning

Nonetheless, teachers appreciate the role of PLC in shaping their personal and professional growth by improving their confidence, fostering collaboration and reducing teacher isolation, as well as developing new pedagogical strategies and classroom management skills. However, poor scheduling of PLC activities, poor facilitation and leadership, insufficient motivation, and poor communication structures are among the several contextual and systemic challenges that impede the implementation of PLCs in rural schools. These barriers, if not addressed, can potentially undermine the sustainability and impact of PLC initiatives that aim to strengthen teacher professional development and improve instructional quality.

To address these challenges, the study recommends the provision of comprehensive orientation and capacity-building programmes to deepen teachers’ understanding of the principles and practices of PLC. Again, effective facilitation, supportive supervision, and motivational strategies should also be prioritised to sustain teachers’ engagement in PLCs. Furthermore, context-specific policies such as flexible scheduling and adequate resourcing could be used to enhance PLC implementation and to respond more to the realities of rural education. School leaders should employ the services of external facilitators to supplement the efforts of curriculum leaders in PLC facilitation in schools. The managers of the schools should monitor and supervise PLC activities in schools to promote active participation, facilitation and leadership.

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In a nutshell, the study underscores a critical need for leadership commitment and systemic reform to improve PLCs' operations and sustainability in rural Ghana. There is a critical need to enhance teachers' knowledge and understanding of PLCs, motivate and encourage them to foster effective collaboration within PLCs to improve teachers' personal and professional practices, thereby advancing educational outcomes in these rural schools.

6.1 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The study explored the lived experiences of teachers from a rural school district in Ghana regarding their conceptual understanding, perceived benefits and challenges and structural changes to improve and sustain PLCs in Ghana. A notable limitation of this study is that it relied on a small sample of 12 participants drawn from one rural school district in Ghana. The limited scope may restrain one from generalising the findings to other school districts, regions or educational contexts, as the experiences captured may not reflect the experience of teachers in urban settings. Future qualitative research that explores the study problem should use a larger and more varied sample from different districts to provide a more detailed and comprehensive insight into the conceptualisation, perceived benefits and challenges, and structural changes to improve and sustain PLCs in Ghana.

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