



# Guideline Document on Developing Professional Learning Communities in South Asia

A Multi-Modal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in Low Resource Settings

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The project, A Multimodal Approach to Teacher Professional Development in low resource settings (MATPD) was a collaborative endeavour. A South- South collaboration of higher education institutions and a global non-profit entity. The consortium aimed to address the poor quality of teacher professional development, particularly for distance teaching and learning through this project. Villa College, Maldives was the lead partner of the consortium. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) was the co-lead and knowledge partner for the proposed innovation, and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan was the third partner, implementing the project in Afghanistan. The learnings from TISS's award winning and globally recognized initiatives on TPD developed in and for under-resourced and developing contexts were adapted, implemented and researched in Afghanistan, Maldives and Nepal.

Villa College is the first and largest private higher education institution in the Maldives offering a variety of academic programmes. The teacher training programs offered by Villa Collage at the Faculty of Educational studies are known to be popular.

The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) has been involved in implementation of education projects that include capacity development, advocacy and service delivery since 1984. The SCA Teacher training aims at building teachers' capacities in subject knowledge and pedagogy which are geared towards teacher professional development, through short courses.

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India ([www.tiss.edu](http://www.tiss.edu)) is among South Asia's premier research and teaching universities in Social Sciences. The Centre of Excellence in Teacher Education (CETE), an Independent Centre on the TISS Mumbai Campus engages in teaching, research, and field action, and has multidisciplinary expertise in the use of ICT in Education for quality reform at scale. CETE envisages its role as a "Catalyst for Transformation in Teacher Education" through multiple activities. The Centre has hosted several UNESCO award-winning field action research (AR) projects including Integrated Approach to Technology in Education (ITE) and Connected Learning Initiative (CLIX). The Centre's in-service teacher education programmes and Communities of Practice have also been awarded a certificate of appreciation. The Centre has also delivered an international project - Teachers Education Master's Program (TEMP) for supporting professional development for Afghanistan's Teacher Educators in collaboration with SCA.



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# Guideline Document on Professional Learning Communities

## Introduction

The present socio-political context in South Asia poses challenging questions for equipping those who educate teachers to design and facilitate collaborative teacher professional development opportunities. The Multimodal Approach for Teacher Professional Development (MATPD) project (<http://idrc.villacollege.edu.mv/>) supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, a joint endeavour with Canada's International Development Research Centre, has been implemented in three South Asian countries – Maldives, Nepal and Afghanistan. It aims to influence policy, practice, and further research in distance teacher professional development through action research and professional learning communities. The landscape mapping study (Kumar et al., 2023) by the MATPD consortium highlights that teachers in these countries, as well as those who educate them (teacher educators), are in dire need of professional development opportunities to address the challenges faced in low-resource contexts. An important part of the project is the South Asia Teacher Educators (SATE) Fellowship, wherein 15 Research Fellows have been selected from each country, representing diverse genders, backgrounds, and professions (teachers, principals, and teacher educators from urban and rural areas) to engage in collaborative action research with teachers following capacity strengthening activities.

## What are Professional Learning Communities? Why are they needed?

There is a growing realization in the international education community about the professional knowledge that teachers have in terms of the specialized knowledge required for teaching particular subjects (Ball, Thames & Phelps, 2008). With this recognition, there have been several efforts and initiatives to support teacher professional learning by focusing on problems of practice (reference) and how to address them.

Research has found that instead of having one-shot workshops, focusing on developing knowledge, teachers learn through sustained engagement through Continuous professional development activities that provide opportunities for them to connect theory with practice through practice-based learning and reflection as well as opportunities to interact with other professionals and peers to stimulate reflection on student learning. Rosenholtz (1989) found that schools where teachers feel supported through networks, cooperation among colleagues and expanded professional roles lead to increased teacher self-efficacy and adoption of new classroom practices. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) reported how teachers develop shared wisdom through

engagement in collaborative inquiry. Darling Hammond (1996) further identified that shared structured time for teachers to work together and engage in observation and feedback supports teacher learning in PLCs.

Professional learning communities provide such an opportunity for teachers by breaking their isolation in the classrooms and providing a forum to articulate their problems of practice and make the contextualized knowledge acquired through experience explicit for other teachers. Teachers engage in sharing and critical analysis of practice which is ongoing, reflective, inclusive, collaborative and learning-oriented (Mitchell and Sackney 2000; Toole and Loius 2002) Having such a community with diverse professionals including teachers, teacher educators, principals, professionals and officials engaged in supporting educational reforms contributes towards development of professional knowledge of teaching and learning. This community could be online, hybrid or meeting in-person. The essential characteristics of the PLC are the focus on opportunities for collective learning provided through establishing norms, opportunities for collaboration, quality communication patterns, within a cohesive group following ethics of caring, access to meaningful resources and artefacts and feedback mechanisms. Stoll and Louis (2007) call for redefining PLC by having border membership by including external as well as internal stakeholders other than teachers as well as crossing boundaries of space and culture. Considering this definition, PLCs can be formed at various levels in the education system ranging from the school level, district, national or even international level with various educational stakeholders.

## How do PLCs work?

Hord (1997) has identified the following ways in which PLCs contribute to the professional development of teachers and teacher educators.

- **Supportive and shared leadership:** Leadership such as school principals, administrators, officials and even teacher educators play an important role in transforming the school as a learning community for teachers in which they actively participate as learners to find new solutions to the problems faced collectively. This development of shared ideas is based on the foundation of the belief that teachers are capable of responding to students' needs rather than having a deficit view of teachers.
- **Collective creativity:** When teachers engage in collaborative inquiry through new and expansive patterns of thinking by going beyond the traditional modes of teaching as they are given the opportunity to explore their autonomy and agency, it leads to reflective dialogue and the development of shared vision and tools for supporting innovative teaching.
- **Shared values and vision:** The core of this shared vision is focus on students learning and each teacher works under the notion of a caring relationship with the students to develop their potential

- **Supportive conditions:** These include the physical infrastructure for meetings and the time created within the structure of the school for teachers to work collaboratively over a period of time and implement innovative ideas in the classroom. It also includes the opportunity for people to develop their capacities by engaging in professional development.
- **Shared personal practice:** This is based on peer observation, reflection and discussion on improving practice of teaching with the larger goal of individual and community improvement enabled by mutual respect and trust among the members.

Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002 discuss how communities transform over a period of time. The first phase is a loose network of people based on shared interests defined as “potential” communities of practice which after developing trust, relationships and the value of sharing knowledge become “coalescing”. Once the focus, roles and boundaries are established and the communities move from sharing tips to developing a body of knowledge it is termed as “Maturing”. The final phases of “stewardship” and “transformation”

## PLCs in MATPD

PLCs in the MATPD project were formed at different levels to facilitate working collaboratively across various cohorts and to provide opportunities for people to share their learning and reflect on their learning with peers. The description and the purpose of the different PLCs are described in this section.

In MATPD, we build five different types of professional learning communities for educators. Four of these communities were formally established by the MATPD team using the Telegram CHAT app. However, the fellows could interact with others using other platforms used in the fellowships like discussion forums in the TISSx courses and by creating informal groups of their own. The fifth community of fellows with teachers were established by fellows on the platform of their choice. The communities were facilitated by the use of digital apps, and online and in-person meetings. The description and purpose of these different PLCs are given below.

1. **Theme-based community:** Five such communities were created focusing on specific action research themes, such as mathematics, language, science, Open Educational Resources (OER), peace education and inclusion. The fellows across different countries working on the same theme as well as their respective Academic Mentors, Field mentors and MATPD support team were part of the group. The kinds of discussion in the group were related to key research ideas and literature related to the particular theme as well as to providing suggestions and feedback on various stages of action research to the fellows. Fellows shared experiences of their classroom implementation, learning and reflections in these groups. Some of the fellows also added collaborative teachers to the group. However, the platform was new for many teachers and thus they did not actively participate in the groups. Fellows interacted with mentors through emails and phone calls and were hesitant

to ask doubts and questions publicly in the group although the purpose of such interactions in supporting everyone's learning was explained.

2. **Country-based groups:** Three telegram groups based on the countries to which the fellows belonged were created. All the fellows from a particular country, the MATPD consortium team members responsible for the local implementation were part of the groups. The discussions in the group varied from notifications of workshops, deadlines and follow-up for SATE fellowship along to sharing of accomplishments and opportunities for participating in external webinars and conferences for the fellows. Most fellows across the three countries were active in this group including the one from Afghanistan. It is important to note that such a community did not exist in Maldives and Afghanistan and thus was a novel engagement for the fellows.
3. One **Global community group of South Asian Teacher Educators fellows** was created in which all fellows, Mentors and MATPD consortium members were part of it. This group focused on discussion for SATE fellowship-related discussions and requirements as well as accomplishments of individual fellows and news about interaction with the government education members about the findings of the MATPD work in the three countries. All fellows were active but they were relatively more active in their own country groups as compared to this one. Fellows hesitated to post their accomplishments and work and posts from country/theme-based groups were mostly forwarded by MATPD consortium members to this group. This group was perceived as an official channel for MATPD. Though there were attempts to facilitate inter-country exchange of ideas and reflections by MATPD consortium members, fellows rarely attempted interactions on their own in this group. Reflective tasks and questions were posed in the first few months of the SATE fellowship in this group but were discontinued due to little engagement by the fellows.
4. **A community of academic mentors and field mentors** with MATPD project consortium members was also created. The objective was to bring all the people engaged in supporting the fellows in designing, conducting, and reflecting on their action research. The telegram app was new for many mentors too but they were able to adapt more easily to this platform to interact. This group also helped in coordinating with academic and field mentors when there was a demand either from the fellows or the mentors for meeting for the purpose of discussing progress on action research. Some of the academic mentors and field mentors were busy and faced challenges in coordinating time for meetings or interacting with the group. Most mentors also had frequent interactions with the fellows through emails and phone calls and thus did not feel the need to use this platform for interaction.
5. Fellows have also created their own **groups with the collaborating teachers** on the platform of their choice. It is these groups that the fellows were most active but the MATPD consortium members were not part of this group. Fellows have reported how they used these groups to connect with the teachers and co-ordinated the TPD workshops and implementation with the teachers. They have had several discussions with the teachers about the particular topic, the difficulties students faced in that topic, and the types of

resources and pedagogical strategies that can be used to support teaching of the particular topic. Many Nepal fellows were able to conduct the second cycle of action research with the teachers while Afghanistan and Maldives fellows were not able to do so due to lack of time and school calendar scheduling difficulties. Nepal fellows reported that these groups helped them in engaging teachers in reflective dialogue about the first cycle of implementation of action research and what changes need to be made for the second implementation. Most teachers resorted to giving more opportunities to students to engage and explore resources and express their ideas in the classroom to support active learning.

These communities provided a space for participants to share challenges and insights arising from their work, including learnings from capacity-strengthening sessions on action research, using information and communications technologies (ICT) and mentoring. Together, they learnt about the challenges faced in doing action research and shared knowledge on potential solutions to address them in under-resourced contexts.

Though these types of groups provide space for asynchronous communication and are available to people with low access to devices and the internet, we also learnt that there is a need for real-time sessions. Some fellows had difficulty articulating their ideas in writing, but real-time interactions with fellow participants drew those ideas out and helped strengthen relationships. Therefore, in addition to the Telegram groups, we held weekly online reflection meetings and enrichment workshops to support Fellows in learning from each other to advance their collaborative action research. Sessions are recorded so people who could not attend and were still able to access the shared learnings. These weekly meetings have also helped in identifying common resource challenges across all three countries, such as connectivity issues for teachers in remote or rural locations. These are being addressed in multiple ways, including through phone calls, asynchronous messages, and online meetings. Building on these learning exchange opportunities, the project team has co-created outputs with the fellows such as collaborative newspaper articles and social media snippets about the fellows' action research ideas and field work.

In order to support the PLC development from the ground up it was important to engage in knowledge mobilization activities with key stakeholders and government functionaries of the countries. This was facilitated through round table discussions and planned meetings. In Maldives, meetings and round tables were conducted with key functionaries responsible for designing teacher professional development at the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education. They were invited to key events such as the project launch and the dissemination of research report outputs. In Nepal, [meetings](#) have been organized with the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), which functions under the Department of Education. In initial meetings, functionaries learnt about the purpose of the project and its design. In subsequent meetings, fellows shared their work with CEHRD members. They discussed quality mentoring experiences and how the role of academic mentors and field mentors helped them in conducting

high-quality action research. Fellows have also taken up responsibility for knowledge mobilization by adopting a bottom-up approach. There have been several instances when schools, professional organizations, and local or provincial governments in Nepal and Maldives have invited Fellows to conduct workshops with groups of teachers beyond their research participants. This indicates that key stakeholders recognize the promising nature of the Fellows' innovations for strengthening the capacities of teachers and teacher educators.

## **Lessons learnt for developing PLCs in South Asia**

The engagement and interaction of fellows across the three countries have led the consortium to learn valuable lessons about how to develop and sustain PLCs in South Asia.

One of the lessons learnt is about the platforms used for developing communities. There are several platforms used for developing communities in South Asian Countries. These are generally Chat-based apps and there are apps which are popular in some countries but not so much in others. They are mostly proprietary apps and thus there are data-related concerns and hesitancy among people to share their thoughts and beliefs. There is also little awareness among education stakeholders about what data is being shared and if proper consent has been taken by the person photographed or other artefacts which are shared. However, there is value in sharing ideas and reflections with others engaged in the same enterprise and learning through these social interactions. Therefore, orientation needs to be held for stakeholders before participating in PLC about data safety, proprietary and non-proprietary software and its implications, and consent for sharing photos and artefacts.

Another important discussion in orientation needs to be about the purpose for establishing the PLCs and how these PLCs can contribute to everyone's learning through sharing and building on ideas. The sharing can be prompted by asking questions about their reflections on implementation, challenges faced, strategies used, new insight about student or teacher learning or even about an interesting research that they have read and which has implications for their context.

There are several challenges that education stakeholders might face in engaging in the community. Internet connectivity and accessibility to devices is a challenging issue that impedes stakeholder engagement. However, using mobile-based platforms leads to more engagement as compared to computer-based platforms. Another challenge that impedes engagement is what language is used for communication on the platform. Since many of the communities were across the countries, the language used for communication was English. This impeded the engagement of some fellows who were not fluent in English. Informal communities where country-based language was used had better engagement with fellows sharing thoughts in informal language while they were hesitant to share in groups which had members across countries. However, due to the presence of a feature for sending audio and video recordings and photos, it became easier for these fellows to communicate. Thus the multimodal nature of engagement was facilitated by the features of the platform. Another reason for this to work was the discomfort that fellows felt in communicating through written language while they were getting comfortable with oral sharing. Thus though the



PLCs may formally be located in chat groups sometimes they need to be supported by in-person meetings and engagements to build the comfort and trust of the people.

It was also found that connecting fellows engagement in communities within a course work, which was facilitated by discussion forums in the TISSx platform for courses motivated fellows to engage more as compared to voluntary engagement in chat-based groups. The initial engagement of the stakeholders may need some form of external motivation. Only when stakeholders engage actively for a period of time and see how it supports their learning, can it help in developing value for learning from engagement in PLCs. This indicates a need for a facilitator of PLCs initially and gradually the ownership and responsibility can be transferred to more central practitioners.

There are both advantages and drawbacks to having one or more persons with authority in the group. This can be authority due to a higher position or academic authority. Sometimes having people with authority in a group stifles the conversation in the group as practitioners start looking up to that person for the person and do not open up about their views and understanding. At the same time, the person with authority can also model the type of respectful and meaningful discussions that can take place on such platforms and pave the way for learning of all the people in the group. It is important for the group members to have shared experiences like in-person workshops, courses or in the case of MATPD action research activity that everyone is engaging in. This shared experience helps further in developing shared value among the group members. In any group, some people will be active and others will be lurkers, learning passively. Facilitators need to have patience for allowing time for lurkers to feel comfortable enough to speak their minds. To facilitate lurkers to engage, non-threatening tasks like engaging in anonymous polls or ice-breaking activities can be engaged in the group. It might also be necessary to keep adding new people to the community to maintain the energy levels and make the group lively.

One of the important lessons learnt is about knowledge mobilization through PLCs which may not always have to start in a top-down manner through exclusive engagement with decision-makers and government functionaries. Researchers can create the conditions to position evidence for use at local and provincial levels as well, by showcasing and creating a demand for alternative education policies and practices. This bottom-up approach creates opportunities for community members to share their ideas and promotes discussions on alternatives. All of this can help cultivate communities of educators and key stakeholders who recognize the importance of the innovations for supporting distance teacher professional development and create a general atmosphere for shaping a more inclusive policy.

Knowledge mobilization efforts at two levels – with project participants and with key stakeholders – can build on each other synergistically. For this, project participants must be supported in articulating emerging evidence, engaging with key stakeholders within and across countries, and showcasing education policy and practice alternatives to local stakeholders, including the public.

This project has shown that engagement at both of these levels can result in meaningful windows of opportunity to support the government's efforts to strengthen teacher professional development.

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