

# Physical Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Support Mechanisms within Contemporary Professional Development

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## Introduction

High expectations for educational performance have resulted in professional development (PD) being critical in facilitating learning among teachers (Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006). Professional learning communities (PLCs), as a form of PD, have potential for increasing teacher learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Although support within PLCs has been identified as necessary within the PD literature; it has not been well defined or studied (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

## Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of support mechanisms within professional learning communities (PLCs).

- What are the types of support mechanisms within a PLC?
- What do physical education teachers perceive as the nature of support mechanisms within PLCs?

## Methods

### Participants

- Thirty four (34) elementary physical education teachers representing three active PLCs in the inter-mountain west region of the United States.

### Data Sources

- Three one hour semi-structured focus group interviews
- Informal conversational interviews
- Follow-up interviews
- Field notes from 7 PLC meetings
- Artifacts (e.g. email messages, meeting agendas, and handouts)

### Data Analysis

- Data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007). Trustworthiness was established through: a) triangulation, b) member checks, c) researcher position, d) peer review, and e) an audit trail.

## Results

Two types of support mechanisms appeared within these PLCs:

1. **Support between people** consisted of all interpersonal interactions that assisted with the professional growth and development of the participants.
2. **Support within environment** included a variety of human and temporal structures.

Analysis revealed the **nature of support between people** was manifested by: **joking/humor, personal connection, helpfulness, and sharing ideas/resources.**

The **nature of support within the environment** was exhibited through: **diversity, inclusivity, relaxed atmosphere, and food/drink.**

## Nature of Support between People

Share Ideas & Resources	Personal Connection	Helpfulness	Humor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members exchanged ideas, resources, and use best practices with PLC members at meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLC members mentioned spending time outside of meetings and taking a personal interest in one another's personal lives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email exchange and opportunity to observe each other, allowed for PLC members to freely disseminate information and help one another.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Humor and joking among PLC members indicated a level of camaraderie and ability to express themselves freely in their own environment.</li> </ul>

*"We have our own equipment so we would try to train people if we were to get pedometers or Bosu® balls, we would try to have a meeting about that."*  
(Focus Group G)

*"I think a lot of us are friends outside of the group, too."*  
(Focus Group D)

*"They'll [PLC members] get back to you and tell you what you need to know or if they don't know they'll help you go somewhere else to go find it."* (Focus Group D)

*"The teachers were very candid when speaking with one another and joked about some of the things they were asked to do in their own schools."* (Field Notes)

## Nature of Support within Environment

Diversity	Inclusivity	Relaxed Atmosphere	Food/Drink
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity of the PLC (yrs. of experience, varied knowledge, and school type) allowed for veteran and new teachers to learn from one another.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLC members expressed a purposeful need to create an inclusive environment where new and existing members feel welcome.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLC meetings occurred in familiar surroundings and were lead by individuals joining the group who fostered a laid back environment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food was provided at several PLC meetings and allowed for informal socialization and gratitude among members.</li> </ul>

*"Everybody from 20-year teachers to first year teachers; we all pull from each other because we are doing the same thing."*  
(Focus Group D)

*"We are all super open to new people. I mean anytime we have new teachers we are like, what do you need?"*  
(Focus Group G)

*"The teachers did not wait for an introduction to begin the meeting. It was apparent that T was the facilitator; however, he did not begin the meeting with any formal welcome."* (Field Notes)

*"Another pro is when K brings in his little Cliff bars; we always get Cliff bars. That is really nice."*  
(Focus Group A)

- The types of support mechanisms within the PLCs resulted from both purposeful planning and incidental occurrences within meetings.
- The nature of support between people within the PLCs fostered opportunities for individuals to develop relationships in a social context, leading to professional growth and learning.
- The nature of support within the environment strengthened the need for PD meeting places to be welcoming places for teachers to learn.
- Participants identified their own learning needs within each PLC. The resulting support mechanisms aligned with these needs thus making PD meaningful.
- The nature of the support mechanisms as identified by the participants may ultimately assist teachers with their professional learning and teaching practice.

## Conclusions and Discussion