



## Professional Learning Community: A Tool for Transforming School Education in Tripura

Uttam Mitra, Assistant Professor in Education, Institute of Advanced Studies in Education, Agartala, Tripura, India

**Abstract:** The concept of Professional Learning Community (PLC) has become quite popular in the developed countries as a means for teachers to engage in professional development for enhancing learning of each student. Studies have proven that PLC makes improvement and progress in all over school culture and performance of the teachers and students. All the stakeholders of the school learn, consult, collaborate, plan, act and reflect to address the needs of the school for making it a learning organisation. Tripura, with highest literacy rate in the country and having access of schooling even in the remote areas, of late shifted its focus to improve quality in education. But quality education cannot be achieved only by appointing quality teachers, improving the physical infrastructure or using technology in education. It is essential that we create a favourable environment in the schools so that each teacher is in a learning mood and experiment innovative strategies to achieve the goals and overcome the challenges. The objective of this paper is to study the current situation of school education and find the need of forming professional learning communities in the schools of Tripura for transforming teaching learning system for imparting quality education to each child which is his/her right now.

**Index Terms - Professional Learning Community, Professional Development, Quality Education, Learning Organisation**

### 1. Introduction:

Since the turn of the 21st Century, the concept of Professional Learning Communities has been on the rise in the United States, Europe and throughout the world. Professional Learning Community (PLC) is an important addition to the world of education for transforming the schools to learning organisations. With the fast change of the world in this century education has also been transforming quickly, and in a big way to cater to the needs of the learners and the society. In the past, teaching was considered by many to be an isolating profession. When any teacher wanted to learn something new, he had to take his own initiatives for learning and this learning might not find any scope to implement in the school environment. In the past, the teachers, would spend the entire day with students except for that brief lunch period, where the teachers met their peers and talked about anything else — but school. This is in fact the situation in most of the schools in our state. But PLCs can change the situation and remove the isolation of the teachers and be helpful in providing quality education to all the learners.

**2. Objective:** The objective of this research paper is to know about PLC, its characteristics, its importance to implement it in the schools of Tripura.

### 3. Research Questions:

- i) What is PLC? Describe the characteristics of PLC?
- ii) Why is PLC critical in transforming schools?
- iii) What is the current situation of school education in Tripura?
- iv) What are the challenges and possibilities to implement PLC in Tripura?

**4. Methodology:** To find the answers of the research questions, the researcher reviewed multiple articles from a number of national and international scholarly journals, searched internet databases, and other online resources utilizing key terms including “professional learning communities,” “communities of practice,” “organizational learning,” and “Tripura education”. Search results were further refined through the use of additional search terms such as “defining,” “school improvement,” and “education.” Additionally, the researcher collected some secondary data from ASER, NAS and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan office, and relied on information from seminar works written about the topics of professional learning communities, as well as additional books related to the topics.

### 5. Rationale:

There is a widely held belief that the quality of learners’ education depends mostly on the quality of teachers. If teachers are professional, they know how to craft quality education. Teacher quality is given high priority in new approaches to education owing to the fact that student learning and teacher quality are inextricably linked. To professionalise their teachers, schools and educational institutions invest large sums of money in providing lots of training, workshops, seminars and courses. However, this top-down approach is flawed since “they have little actual effect on classroom teaching as not much change happens, and if it does, it does not last long”. Transforming teachers into thinkers and inquirers who play an active part in knowledge construction can guarantee quality education. However, this does not take place unless the right supportive atmosphere exists. It has been noticed that teachers feel the need of professional development that involves teachers in the dual capacities of both teaching and learning and creates new visions of what, when, and how teachers should learn. Hence it has become essential to create a professional learning community in every

school where team work, collaborative learning, sustained reflection, and sharing professional practices help the children to perform better.

## 6. What is PLC?

A professional learning community, or PLC, is a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. The term is also applied to schools or teaching faculties that use small-group collaboration as a form of professional development. Shirley Hord, an expert on school leadership, came up with perhaps the most efficient description of the strategy: "The three words explain the concept: Professionals coming together in a group—a community—to learn." In simple words, a professional learning community is "a group of people working interdependently toward the same goal."

PLC is an improved teaching culture with a focus on student learning by continuous professional development of the teachers. The PROFESSIONAL refers to the teacher here. Teachers are at the heart of PLCs. It is an initiative that allows teachers to have a say in what they do for students every day. In a school setting, a PLC can include anyone who can assist in the goal set by the teacher group, from administrators to custodians, from personal aides to guidance counsellors. However, primarily — the professionals are the teachers. In PLC, top-down directives are limited. No longer does the administration dictate the HOW. Most of the teachers are now trained and they possess the required knowledge, skills and understanding to do their job well. PLC is the perfect tool to assist the teachers to achieve their goals. Teachers also understand that they must continue LEARNING to prepare the students for the 21st century. They must remain up-to-date in their profession to fulfil the diversified needs of the learners by becoming 'life long learners'. When PROFESSIONALS are LEARNING together and collaborating with each other on a regular basis, with common goals and purposes, they develop into a COMMUNITY.

A Professional Learning Community may meet daily as part of the school's schedule, or weekly at an afterschool meeting, or monthly using voluntary time, but a PLC will have scheduled meetings. These regular meetings have a specific focus or set of focuses. If meeting daily, the PLC will likely be multi-faceted, but if meeting monthly, the PLC may have only one focus, like Social and Emotional Learning or Data-driven Instruction.

## 7. Definitions of PLC:

- i) "Professional learning communities are groups composed of professionals that meet regularly to share their experiences and expertise and to collaborate on efforts to improve their professional craft" - (DuFour, 2004).
- ii) "A professional learning community is made up of team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision." - Reichstetter (2006)
- iii) "Professional learning communities have emerged as arguably the best, most agreed-upon means by which to continuously improve instruction and student performance" - Schmoker (2006)
- iv) "Professional Learning Community is a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning". Roland Barth (1990)
- v) Myers and Simpson (1998) described learning communities as "cultural settings in which everyone learns, in which every individual is an integral part, and in which every participant is responsible for both the learning and the overall well-being of everyone else".

## 8. Origin of PLC:

The philosophical underpinnings of the method of working together for improving practice or knowledge are centuries old. In his research on communities of practice, Wenger (1998) summarizes the concept of professional collaboration as a process where people "engage in collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour". Wenger suggested that this type of collaboration goes back centuries, when tribes learned to survive by working together, but that it also has modern applications, such as with groups of like-minded professionals who collaborate to solve problems. However, Peter Senge (1990) borrowing from the business world described a core tenet of a learning community as "people continually expand their capacity to create desired results". Senge's perspective was applied to education with the caveat that the organization's focus should be on learning as opposed to simply improving the efficiency of an organization's infrastructure.

## 9. Activities done in PLC

While the specific activities and goals of a professional learning community may vary widely from school to school, the following are a few examples of common activities that may take place in meetings:

**Discussing teacher work:** Participants collectively review lesson plans or assessments that have been used in a class, and then offer critical feedback and recommendations for improvement.

**Discussing student work:** Participants look at examples of student work turned in for a class, and then offer recommendations on how lessons or teaching approaches may be modified to improve the quality of student work.

**Discussing student data:** Participants analyse student-performance data from a class to identify trends—such as which students are consistently failing or underperforming—and collaboratively develop proactive teaching and support

## 10. Characteristics of PLC:

A PLC has been found effective with the following characteristics:

- i) **Shared values and vision:** The community's conversation and actions are grounded in a shared vision of what the school should be about and in alignment with a mental image of newly desired and designated strategies and processes that are implemented effectively.
- ii) **Structural conditions.** Time for the communities to meet daily -- or weekly at a minimum -- uninterrupted in a comfortable space is basic. Paper, electronic, and human resources as well as disaggregated data from multiple sources in easy-to-understand formats must be available.

- iii) Supportive relational conditions. Community members' respect and regard for each other, their conversation styles and interactions, and how they confront conflict all contribute to trust in each other that is essential for a smoothly functioning community.
- iv) Intentional collective learning. The professional learning community's enduring purpose is the continuous learning of the professionals -- the educators. The community's decision about what they will learn and how they will learn it derives from their students' learning needs.
- v) Peers supporting peers. Community members invite each other to their school or classrooms to observe an identified school or classroom practice of the host member. The visitor observes, takes notes, and conducts a sharing session with the host member. Peers' visitations provide support as well as assistance to one another in order to operate at their professional peak in service to students.
- vi) Shared and supportive leadership. The titled leader of the school, the principal, and the professional learning community members create opportunities for teachers to assume leadership roles and support them in developing the knowledge and skills to do so. Authority and decision making are shared, and, in this way, teachers are given voice and choice. Developing new skills and habits of mind promote the professional learning community members' feelings of efficacy. They grow in competence and confidence and in developing trust in each other to become true professionals.
- vii) Collective responsibility: It's a prime feature of PLC in which all teachers take up collective responsibility for student learning. And so, teachers can pressurise other teachers who are not doing actively as per the line for doing their share. Collective responsibility gives space for all teachers to take initiative and do without waiting for permission of higher authorities.
- viii) Reflective and professional inquiry: Here tacit knowledge of teachers on their own subjects is brought into explicit knowledge through sharing with other teachers. Privatism has to be replaced by 'de-privatisation' of practice'. Teachers should discuss on educational issues in application of knowledge. They would share their hitherto knowledge through observation and case analysis and else and seek to translate into shared knowledge through interactive sharing with others.
- ix) Collaboration: Collaboration is crucial from within teachers and also external members including staffs, management other higher authority of education. It should be a collective effort with mutually supporting and assisting each other. Inter-dependence is crucial for collaboration and otherwise envisaged better teaching would be unachievable.

### 11. Importance of PLC:

Studies have generally supported the efficacy of PLCs in achieving this goal. Schools with strong PLCs have been associated with sustained innovative initiatives, and improved student achievement and teacher instruction. PLCs have, thus, become a catchphrase for reforming schools and classroom instruction. Professional Learning Communities can bring huge difference in transforming the schools and making them learning organisations. Hord (1997) identified several effects of learning communities.

For staff, the following results have been observed:

- i) Reduction of isolation of teachers.
- ii) Increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigour in working to strengthen the mission.
- iii) Shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success.
- iv) Powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners.
- v) Increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations.
- vi) Higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students.
- vii) More satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism.
- viii) Significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than in traditional schools.
- ix) Commitment to making significant and lasting changes and higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change.

For students, the results include:

- i) Decreased dropout rate.
- ii) Lower rates of absenteeism.
- iii) Increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools.
- iv) Greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools.
- v) Smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.

### 12. Current situation of education in Tripura:

Education in Tripura has developed at a very fast pace in the last few decades in spite of the fact that it is one of the smallest states in India. Tripura is the state with highest literacy in the entire country with 97.22 % as per 2016 Literacy Assessment Survey (LAS). Of that, male literacy stands at 97.34 percent while female literacy is at 96.79 percent. Out of total 7872 habitations, 7285 habitations in the state has access to free and compulsory education with total 4844 schools (Elementary Education Report Card: 2015-16) out of which 4322 are Govt. school (89.22%). All the schools have total 47,255 teachers (EERC) with pupil teacher ratio is (12:1) much lower than national average. Only 739 children are out of school and they are mostly children with severe disability. Drop out rate in the primary level has been reduced to 1.28. All these clearly speak of a very high quantitative achievements. There are total 59 BRCs and 332 CRCs which provide training to all the in service teachers for various duration starting from 1 day at CRC level to 5 and 7 day at BRC level. 10 Day residential trainings are given to the resource persons and the master trainers are trained from Vikramshila Education Resource Society. The Govt spends 6.2% of GSDP and 21.33% of the state budget (Public Financing of School Education: 2017) for education which is quite higher than the national average. But in spite of all these sincere efforts of the Govt., the NAS report 2017 and ASER 2016 do not speak in favour of quality education. In National Achievement Survey Report 2017, students of Tripura scored lower than national survey.

## Average Achievement by Class and Subject

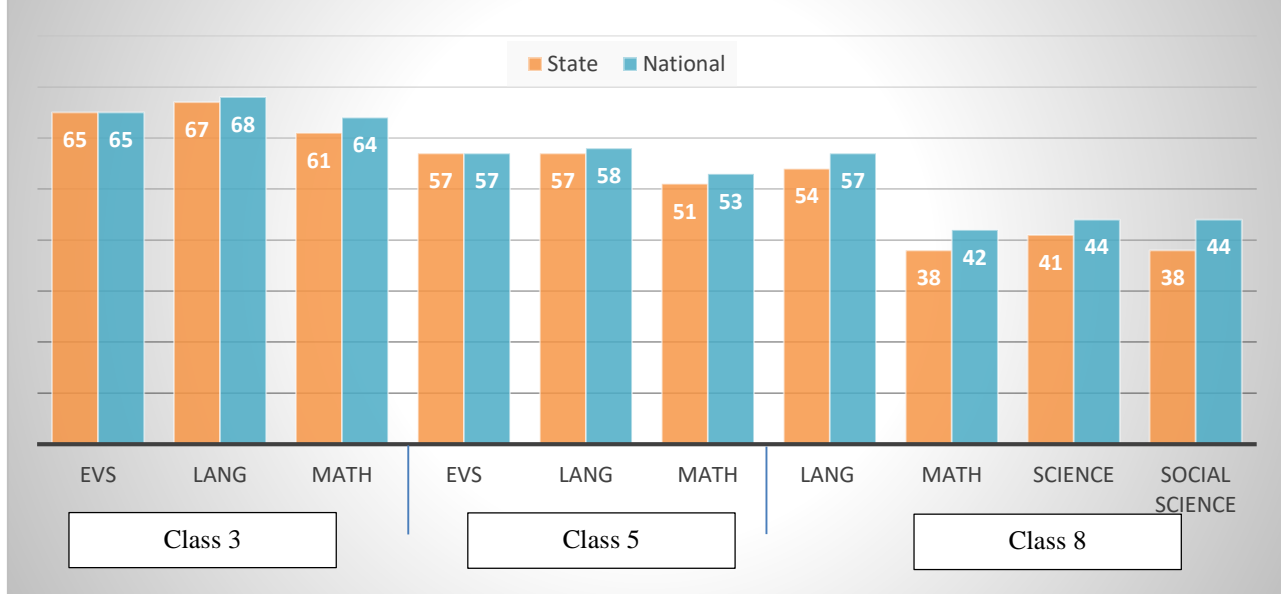


Table 1: Average achievement by classes and subjects

In Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2016 states that 25% of the students of our state of Class VIII cannot read the text of STD II level, 69.4% students cannot do division and 50% students cannot read even an easy sentence.

Std	Not even letter	Letter	Word	Std I level text	Std II level text	Total
I	20.7	37.4	29.1	11.7	1.2	100
II	9.8	32.8	27.5	14.4	15.5	100
III	4.0	20.4	27.8	19.8	28.0	100
IV	3.6	11.3	23.0	21.7	40.4	100
V	2.3	16.3	13.9	16.4	51.0	100
VI	0.6	7.6	14.9	24.4	52.7	100
VII	2.8	6.6	11.2	14.4	64.9	100
VIII	0.0	1.5	5.1	18.4	75.0	100

Table 2: Reading level Grade wise in Tripura

Std	Not even letter	Letter	Word	Std I level text	Std II level text	Total
I	46.1	31.7	12.4	5.0	4.8	100
II	23.5	31.5	19.8	11.8	13.4	100
III	13.6	24.1	19.9	17.3	25.1	100
IV	8.5	17.2	17.7	19.2	37.4	100
V	6.0	13.3	14.2	18.6	47.8	100
VI	4.0	9.6	11.6	18.0	56.9	100
VII	2.8	7.2	8.9	15.1	66.1	100
VIII	2.0	5.4	6.5	13.0	73.0	100

Table 3: Reading level Gradewise in India

Std	Not even 1-9	Recognize numbers		Subtract	Divide	Total
		1-9	10-99			
I	21.1	36.6	37.4	4.8	0.0	100
II	9.2	33.4	39.8	16.4	1.2	100
III	1.0	21.3	41.7	31.6	4.4	100
IV	3.0	15.5	35.3	32.8	13.6	100
V	0.2	14.9	31.5	33.5	19.9	100
VI	0.6	9.3	34.3	35.1	20.7	100
VII	2.2	7.3	31.9	32.9	25.8	100
VIII	0.0	2.1	27.0	38.3	32.6	100

Table 4: Arithmetic level Grade Wise in Tripura

Std	Not even 1-9	Recognize numbers		Subtract	Divide	Total
		1-9	10-99			
I	39.9	35.1	20.0	3.5	1.5	100
II	17.7	35.0	32.8	10.6	3.8	100
III	9.3	27.6	35.6	19.2	8.4	100
IV	5.8	19.8	32.7	25.3	16.6	100
V	4.0	15.5	30.0	24.6	25.9	100
VI	2.5	11.4	28.7	24.9	32.5	100
VII	2.0	8.1	27.7	24.5	37.7	100
VIII	1.2	6.1	26.2	23.3	43.2	100

Table 5: Arithmetic level Gradewise in India

Std	Not even capital letter	Capital letters	Small letters	Simple Words	Easy Sentences	Total
I	25.3	16.5	33.6	19.2	5.4	100
II	18.7	13.3	33.1	23.3	11.6	100
III	6.6	13.9	30.5	32.9	16.2	100
IV	6.0	12.1	25.0	31.8	25.1	100
V	3.0	11.2	28.0	33.1	24.7	100

Std	Not even capital letter	Capital letters	Small letters	Simple Words	Easy Sentences	Total
I	53.2	16.8	17.2	9.6	3.2	100
II	33.2	20.3	24.2	14.6	7.7	100
III	22.8	19.1	26.2	19.3	12.7	100
IV	16.0	16.1	26.3	23.0	18.5	100
V	11.9	13.7	25.6	24.3	24.5	100

VI	1.6	5.4	20.1	37.2	35.7	100	VI	8.2	11.0	23.5	25.7	31.7	100
VII	1.6	6.8	18.5	32.4	40.7	100	VII	5.9	8.9	20.8	26.1	38.2	100
VIII	1.2	4.4	14.3	30.1	50.0	100	VIII	4.5	7.2	18.4	24.7	45.2	100

Table 6: Reading level English Gradewise in Tripura

Table 7: Reading level English Gradewise in India

Therefore, a different approach is required in stead of the top down approach which is highly controlled by the bureaucrats. PLC can be the right step to transform the teaching learning in the schools by making the teachers reflective learners.

### 13. The challenges that may arise for starting PLC:

- i) **Bureaucratic rigidity:** Like other parts in India, we also have a hierarchical bureaucracy where the commands drop down from the top and the bottom is to implement whatever commands have been received from the top. Teachers are at the lower level of the hierarchy having the duty of following the command from the top. Teachers are considered just transmitting whatever textbook they provided and they are inspected to find their faults and punish publicly. A paradigm shift is required for creating a favourable environment for education and for creating PLC culture in the schools.
- ii) **Inertia among the teachers:** There is a tendency among the teachers that teaching is a safe and smooth-flowing profession without much hardwork and challenge. There are many long experienced teachers who have been teaching in a traditional way and are comfortable only with it. Therefore, there will be resistance from the teachers to adapt to the new system of PLC where they are expected to be an active change maker.
- iii) **Individualism among teachers:** Teachers prefer to teach in the classroom independently and do not want to be observed by his peer, receive feedback about his teaching or discuss his method of teaching with others. This culture is a total contrast to PLC.
- iv) **Time constraints for teachers:** Teachers are expected to complaints of time constraint for any PLC structure and in most cases this is nothing but a lame excuse.
- v) **Groupism among teachers:** In many schools different groups are found on the basis of seniority, sexes and political ideologies. But PLC wants a platform where all teachers join together and come up with shared understanding through mutual trust.

### 14. The steps that can be taken for creating effective professional learning communities:

- Step 1:** The SCERT, the Department Education must be willing to experiment this proven strategy of creating PLCs in the schools of Tripura.
- Step 2:** In the beginning 5 schools in every block may be identified to experiment this PLC culture and gain learning with the help BRC and CRC.
- Step 3:** Training must be arranged for the all the staff of the school together so that they all remain on the same page. BRPs CRPs and other Key Resource Persons relating to teacher education – faculties from IASE, CTE, DIETs should be invited in these trainings. Resource Persons for the training should be those who are having some experience in implementing PLCs in the schools. Suggestions: Brilliant Stars School, Tripura. Gateway School Mumbai.
- Step 4:** Support must be extended to those schools on a regular basis by the SCERT, BRC, CRC and the TEIs by observing their Reflection Meetings, Whole School Meeting, In House Training by giving feedback, designing further training in consultation with the experts, modelling etc.
- Step 5:** Arranging platforms where the schools can share their learning and discuss the strategies to overcome the challenges they face.
- Step 6:** Change Facilitator may be appointed for the schools which are struggling. Change facilitators make an important contribution by assisting staff in bringing a school's disjointed and poorly articulated efforts into alignment, particularly at the beginning of the improvement process. Change facilitators can also take a "balcony view", a macro-centric view of situations, in which they try, with compassion and detachment, to understand the nature of the existing situation. In so doing, facilitators understand the situations and contexts with which school staff are dealing, and can encourage actions of individuals in new roles, helping their school to become a professional learning community.
- Step 7:** The school teachers may be arranged to visit in some schools where PLC is in practice.
- Step 8:** Reward and recognition may be given to those schools which will be successful in developing Professional Learning Community.
- Step 9:** Gradually PLC should be established in all the schools of Tripura.

### 15. Conclusion:

Looking at the prevalent condition of educational system and its outcomes, the researcher strongly feels the schools are in dire need of getting 'recultured' through practising concept like 'professional learning communities'. It is a proved concept in terms of students' achievement and continuous professional development of the teachers. It's a long-term mean needed lot more flexibility and commitment among each stakeholders of education. Tripura, being a small state, PLC can be an ideal tool to transform and revive the Govt. schools. Leaders in Education must act instead of remaining passive onlookers and fire fighters.

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