

# ABSTRACT

This study, located in the field of in-service teacher professional development, investigated what knowledge teachers learned in three subject-based professional learning communities (PLCs), how they learned it, and the conditions that enabled this learning. The Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa 2011-2025 envisages all in-service teachers participating in PLCs in order to learn knowledge-for-teaching. There is limited research on whether PLCs are likely to be effective for this purpose in South Africa. Even less is known about what types of knowledge can be learned in PLCs. Drawing on the literature related to teacher education and professional knowledge (Shulman, 1986; 1987; Ball, Thames & Phelps, 2008; Winch, 2010, 2013a, 2013b) a “Framework for knowledge-for-teaching” was created and used to investigate what knowledge was learned by participants in three PLCs.

The study is a case study of cases in which each of the three PLCs, purposively selected, is a separate case on which cross-case analysis was undertaken (Bassegy, 1999; Adler & Reed, 2002). It explored what teachers from eleven diverse schools from one school district in Gauteng discussed and did in PLC sessions over a period of eighteen months. Minutes or verbatim transcripts of audio-recordings of the sessions supplemented with individual interviews, questionnaires, and learning reflection journals of the participants provided the main data sources and were analysed using a grounded theory approach. A key finding is that teachers learned more practical knowledge than subject matter knowledge and that teachers with the ability to make inferential connections between propositions (Winch, 2010; 2013a), dependent on sound subject matter knowledge, were able to contribute more knowledge and were more confident than teachers whose subject matter knowledge was weaker. Four key factors that enabled the work of the PLCs were identified: supportive school and teacher characteristics, effective facilitation, a definite focus on learning, and the use of structured collaborative enquiry processes. From the findings a “Framework for Learning in Professional Learning Communities” was constructed to identify these and other enabling or inhibiting factors which impact on what can be learned in a PLC as well as other potential positive outcomes of participation. One implication of these findings is that the effectiveness of PLCs is likely to be improved if the enabling factors are strengthened. A second is that the model of PLC adopted in South Africa may have to be adapted to meet the needs of teachers whose subject matter knowledge is inadequate. In light of the need for subject matter knowledge, attention will need to be given to how subject matter knowledge can be learned in PLCs and to how to make this learning more systematic.

**Keywords:** teacher professional development, professional learning communities, facilitation, learning focus, knowledge-for-teaching, collaborative enquiry processes.