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**An Exploration of Foundation Phase Teachers' Learning in a
Professional Learning Community**

By

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of
Education,**

**Teacher Development Studies, in the School of Education, Pietermaritzburg
Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa**

Supervisor: Dr F-Q. B. Zulu

February 2023

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, **Thembisile Racheal Nyathi**, declare that:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other person's data, pictures, graphs, or other information unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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ETHICAL CLEARANCE



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26 August 2021

Miss Thembisile Racheal Nyathi (200006072)
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Dear Miss Nyathi,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002803/2021

Project title: An exploration of teacher learning of Foundation Phase teachers in a Professional Learning Community

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 05 May 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 26 August 2022.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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INSPIRING GREATNESS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late, dearest mother, Thabisile Flominah Nyathi, intombi kaMphathuza, who taught me hard work and to believe in myself. I shall always remember you. A further dedication goes to Thobani and Zethembiso, may this piece of academic work inspire you in your academic pursuits in the future. Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili!

ABSTRACT

In the South African context, the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED) Department of Basic Education and Department of Higher Education and Training, regard Professional Learning Communities as an effective model for teacher professional development at a local level (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The purpose of this research study was to explore the nature of teacher learning activities for teachers in the Foundation Phase PLC and the kinds of teacher knowledge they could acquire through their participation in the selected PLC.

The study was located within an interpretive paradigm and adopted a qualitative case study design. Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were used to generate the data to respond to the key research questions of the study. The participants comprised five (5) Foundation Phase teachers, who were members of the PLC. This study adopted Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning activities and Grossman's (1990) domains of teacher knowledge as conceptual frameworks.

The findings of the study revealed that the Foundation Phase teachers participating in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) activities learned through interacting with facilitators and sharing experiences with their colleagues and peers. It was also found that teachers learned through modelling as Foundation Phase (FP) learners. Furthermore, the study revealed that teacher learning and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) also occurred outside workshops through WhatsApp group platforms. However, the findings revealed several challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, inadequate internet connection, lack of resources, lack of support in some schools, and heavy teaching workloads, which impacted the teachers' participation in the activities of their PLC. Nevertheless, the findings of the study reveal that subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge and knowledge of the context were learnt. The findings show that there was more emphasis on pedagogical content knowledge.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the teacher learning activities should include concepts from all four FP subjects. This will enhance

teachers' ability to teach all learning areas with confidence. The facilitation roles should be rotated amongst all members of the PLC for the effective functioning of the PLC. Members of the PLC should agree on the time and venue for meetings to allow members to attend meetings regularly.

Key words: Teacher Learning; Professional Development; Teacher Knowledge; Professional Learning Communities; Foundation Phase

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACE	Advanced Certificate in Education
ANA	Annual National Assessment
BEd.	Bachelor of Education
CoP	Community of Practice
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DH	Departmental Head
DoE	Department of Education
DUT	Durban University of Technology
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ELRC	Education Labour Relations Council
FAL	First Additional Language
FP	Foundation Phase
FSDoE	Free State Department of Education
GPK	General Pedagogical Knowledge
GGR	Group Guided Reading
HL	Home Language
INSET	In-Service Education and Training
ISPFTED	Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Training and Development
IQMS	Integrated Quality Management System
KC	Knowledge of the Content
LA	Learning Area
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NNSSF	National Norms and Standards for Schools Funding
NPDE	National Professional Diploma in Education
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge

PD	Professional development
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PL1	Post Level 1
PLCs	Professional Learning Communities
QMS	Quality Management System
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA	University of South Africa

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge	25
Figure 4.1: Extract for a reading activity: Reading comprehension	44
Figure 4.2: Model of RESCI doll.....	46

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Features of professional learning communities (Adapted from DBE & DHET, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006, in Zulu & Mukeredzi, 2021).....	18
Table 2.2: Kwakman's (2005) professional learning activities.....	23
Table 3.1: Biographical details of the participants who were the members of the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3) Professional Learning Community.....	32
Table 3.2: Seven steps of data analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 197).....	35
Table 4.1: Workshops for the Foundation Phase PLC.....	42

Table of Contents

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	ii
ETHICAL CLEARANCE	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	v
ABSTRACT	vi
LIST OF ACRONYMS	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF TABLES	xi
1. CHAPTER ONE	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background to the study	1
1.3 Purpose and focus of the study	2
1.4 Problem statement	3
1.5 Rationale of the study	3
1.6 Key research questions	4
1.7 Aim and objectives of the study	5
1.8 Brief review of related literature review and conceptual frameworks	5
1.9 Research design and methodology	6
1.10 Data analysis	7
1.11 Overview of the chapters	7
1.12 Conclusion	8
2. CHAPTER TWO	10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Professional Development	10
2.3 Teacher learning	14
2.4 Professional learning communities	17
2.5 Conceptual frameworks	22
2.5.1 Grossman’s (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge	23
2.6 Conclusion	27
3. CHAPTER THREE	28
3.1 Introduction	28
3.2 Research paradigm	28
3.3 Research approach	29
3.4 Research design	30
3.5 Selection of the participants	31
3.6 Methods of collecting data	32

3.6.1	Semi-structured interviews	32
3.6.2	Observations	33
3.7	Data analysis	34
3.8	Issues of trustworthiness	36
3.8.1	Credibility	36
3.8.2	Confirmability	36
3.8.3	Dependability	36
3.8.4	Transferability	37
3.9	Ethical considerations	37
3.10	Conclusion	38
4.	CHAPTER 4	39
4.1	Introduction	39
4.2	Profile of the participants	39
4.2.1	Miss Zobuhle	39
4.2.2	Miss MaHlomu	40
4.2.3	Miss Tamaga	40
4.2.4	Miss Rebecca	41
4.2.5	Miss Tyrene	41
4.3	Workshops of Foundation Phase PLC	41
4.4	Data presentation and analysis	42
4.4.1	Teacher learning in the Foundation Phase PLC	42
4.4.1.1	Reading	42
4.4.1.2	Experimenting	46
4.4.1.3	Reflecting	47
4.4.1.4	Collaborating	48
4.4.2	What kinds of teacher knowledge are learnt in Foundation Phase PLC?	49
4.4.2.1	Subject matter knowledge	49
4.4.2.2	General pedagogic knowledge	50
4.4.2.3	Pedagogical content knowledge	51
4.4.2.4	Knowledge of the context	52
4.4.3	Challenges that hindered teachers' participation in the activities of the PLC	54
4.4.4	Foundation Phase teachers' views on the role of the PLC	56
4.5	Conclusion	57
5.	CHAPTER FIVE	58
5.1	Introduction	58
5.2	Discussions of findings	58
5.2.1	What is the nature of teacher learning activities of the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?	58

5.2.2	How does teacher learning occur in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?	61
5.2.3	What kinds of teacher knowledge do Foundation Phase teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community?	62
5.3	Recommendations	64
5.4	Limitation of this study.....	66
5.5	Ideas for further research	66
5.6	Conclusion	66
	References	68
	Appendix 1: DBE Permission to conduct the study	81
	Appendix 2: Gatekeeper Permission Letter for Foundation Phase Subject Advisor	83
	Appendix 3: Informed Consent for Participants.....	84
	Appendix 4: Interview schedule.....	86
	Appendix 5: Certificate from the Editor.....	87
	Appendix 6: Turnitin Report.....	88

CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the overview of the study. Thus, the chapter includes the background of the study, the purpose and focus of the study, the rationale of the study, the research questions and objectives that underpin the study, a summary of the literature review and the research methodology and design. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting an overview of the chapters.

1.2 Background to the study

There are teachers' groups in Linda District. These teachers' groups are formed by secondary and primary school teachers. It seems these groups are responding to the call by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to form Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Sometimes, these PLCs are called clusters or Communities of Practice (CoP). The DBE presented a policy called Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (ISPFTED), stating the significance of the establishment of PLCs to enhance teacher professionalism. However, some of these groups have been operating even before 2011 in the form of teachers' clusters for secondary school subjects. Jita and Mokhele (2014) define a cluster as a group of subject teachers from different schools within the same geographical area. Generally, clusters have been regarded as places and spaces for the moderation of assessment tasks. Mokhele (2019) contends that the purpose of clusters is for teachers from different schools, phases and departments to come together to share their experiences, skills and knowledge to promote curriculum access for their learners. Studies conducted in South Africa by Jita and Mokhele (2014) which was initiated to enhance continuing professional development for the subjects taught in secondary schools. Furthermore, a study by Brodie (2019) has supported the importance of groups of teachers who come together to work collaboratively to improve their teaching practice. To this end, this study seeks to contribute insights into PLCs involving Foundation

Phase teachers in Linda District¹. Interestingly, all four (4) circuits of Linda District have PLCs for Foundation Phase teachers.

1.3 Purpose and focus of the study

The purpose of the study was to examine the nature of learning activities in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for Foundation Phase (FP) (i.e. Grade R-3) teachers. The study also aims to understand how teacher learning occurs and the types of teacher knowledge that are learned by teachers in the selected PLC. The study was conducted in one of the four (4) circuits in Linda District. The PLC operate at a circuit level. Given the fact that one of these circuits had many schools, a decision had been taken to divide it into two (2) PLCs, namely, the Upper and Lower Circuits). The Lower Circuit comprised 10 primary schools, while the Upper Circuit eight primary schools. This study was conducted in the Lower Circuit PLC, with teachers coming from its eight (8) primary schools. These are Quintile 1 and 2 schools, situated in a deeply rural area. According to the National Norms and Standards for Schools Funding (NNSSF), Quintile 1 and 2 schools are often under-resourced (Department of Education, 2006). To this end, these schools have been classified as no-fee paying based on the socioeconomic context of the community in which they are situated.

¹ Pseudonym

1.4 Problem statement

The problem being addressed in this study is the lack of research on learning of FP teachers within PLCs. In the South African context, the existing studies on teacher learning in PLCs such as Brodie (2019), Zulu and Mukeredzi, (2021) predominantly concentrate on PLCs of secondary schools' teachers PLCs leaving a significant dearth of knowledge regarding learning experiences and development of FP teachers. The lack of FP teacher learning studies could suggest that primary school teachers in the rural context are deprived of professional development programmes. PLCs as a model for professional development is highlighted in Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (ISPFTED) (Department of Basic Education & Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). The ISPFTED is intended to improve the quality of teacher education and development in order to improve the quality of teachers and teaching within a 15- year timeframe. However, there is dearth in research studies focussing on FP teachers' PLCs.

1.5 Rationale of the study

In the international context, there are studies such as Thornton and Cherrington's (2014), which have focused on Early Childhood Education PLCs, while within the South African context, there has been more focus on PLCs of secondary school teachers. This has been highlighted in Zulu and Mukeredzi's (2021) study, which explored the extent to which two teacher-learning communities of secondary schools reflected the characteristics of effective PLCs. Zulu and Mukeredzi (2021) found that one of the two teacher-learning communities reflected the features of PLCs. Zulu and Mukeredzi (2021) contend that professional learning communities from socioeconomically deprived contexts can be operational when all relevant stakeholders support them. A study by Brodie (2019), which explored how mathematics teachers' professional agency benefited and limited their involvement in PLCs, concluded that teachers could overcome time limitations and assorted school management support constraints and maintain trust and take ownership of their learning. This suggests that there is hope for PLCs which operate within socioeconomically deprived contexts, including deep rural areas.

In South Africa, Early Childhood Education (ECE) may be referred to as an aspect of the Foundation Phase (FP). Thornton and Cherrington (2014), in their study, claimed that there is a “dearth of research into professional learning communities, despite their potential importance for the early childhood education sector” (p. 94). I relate this to our context, that there are fewer or no research studies on PLCs for Foundation Phase teachers; more studies have focused on PLCs for secondary school teachers. In addition, unlike the reality of PLCs in South Africa, the Integrated Strategic Planning Frameworks for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (ISPFTED) (2011-2025) emphasises PLCs operating within a school context Department of Basic Education and Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011). Moreover, ISPFTED (2011-2015) states that PLCs are important for strengthening and enhancing teacher professionalism and promoting participation in professional development activities (Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2011). In South Africa, teachers in the Foundation Phase teach all subjects; they do not specialise. In light of this, the study seeks to understand how teacher learning occurs in Foundation Phase PLCs.

I have been teaching in a secondary school for almost 15 years and have attended PLCs for Life Sciences, Natural Sciences and Technology, the subjects that I was teaching. The PLCs were structured as a formally planned activity, which was often organised by the Subject Advisor or PLC Coordinator. The literature on PLCs suggests that PLCs are crucial for teacher’s development (see, for instance, Brodie, 2019). The motivation to conduct this study was triggered after I noticed that studies on PLCs often focused solely on secondary school teachers. I then developed an interest and motivation to conduct this research study after I became aware of a PLC for Foundation Phase teachers.

1.6 Key research questions

This study addressed the following key research questions:

1. What is the nature of learning activities in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community (PLC)?
2. How does teacher learning occur in a Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?

3. What kinds of teacher knowledge do teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community?

1.7 Aim and objectives of the study

The study aimed to examine the nature of teacher learning in a PLC for Foundation Phase (i.e. Grade R-3) teachers.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To understand the nature of teacher learning in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community.
2. To examine how teacher learning happened in a Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community.
3. To understand the kinds of knowledge teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community.

1.8 Brief review of related literature review and conceptual frameworks

The key concepts of this study are professional development, teacher learning and professional learning community. Guskey (2009) defines professional development as the process and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers so that they might in turn improve their students' learning. Teachers' professional development can be achieved through formal experiences, such as workshops, and professional development meetings, where information could be transmitted to teachers who will then apply the skills and knowledge acquired to their classrooms. Teacher learning and professional development are not just an event; they are a complex system that involves numerous processes, mechanisms, actions and elements (Opfer & Peddler, 2011).

The literature suggests that teacher learning occurs when teachers work collaboratively, discussing curriculum matters, new knowledge, skills and challenges in teaching and learning (Mphahlele, 2014). Fraser, Reid and Mckinney (2007) define teacher learning as a process of self-development, change and individual growth in the teacher's knowledge, skills and beliefs. Drawing from Mphahlele (2014) and Fraser et al. (2007), it can be argued that teacher learning occurs as an individual and collective

process, to improve a teacher's professional knowledge, beliefs and skills. Teacher learning often happens within a community of professionals, for instance, within a PLC. Lieberman and Miller (2008) define a PLC as a gathering of teachers who meet regularly to strengthen their subject content and pedagogical knowledge to improve student learning.

This study adopted two conceptual frameworks; Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning activities and Grossman's (1990) domains of teacher knowledge. In Kwakman (2003) I adopted four main categories of professional learning, namely, reading, experiencing, reflecting and collaborating. The category referred to as non-category acknowledges that participation in professional learning activities takes place beyond the main category. Kwakman's (2003) professional learning activities are appropriate because this study sought to explore the nature of teacher learning in a PLC for Foundation Phase teachers. Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge, Subject Content Knowledge (SCK), General Pedagogical Knowledge (GPK), Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Knowledge of Context (KC) were appropriate for the study because when teachers are gathered in their PLC, they acquire different teaching strategies and methods to improve their teaching practice and enhance learners' performance. The concepts of the aforementioned frameworks are defined in chapter two.

1.9 Research design and methodology

This study was located within the interpretivist paradigm as it sought to explore teacher learning in a PLC for Foundation Phase teachers. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) argue that researchers do not aim to predict what people will do but to describe and understand how people make sense of their worlds and how they make meaning of their particular actions (p. 26). Cohen et al. (2014) assert that interpretive researcher seeks to understand and explain the world around them. Furthermore, Mertens (2005), cited in MacKenzie and Knipe (2006), contends that the interpretivist paradigm is socially constructed. This suggests that context is important as it reflect the participants' backgrounds and experiences.

This study adopted a case study research design. The case in the study was the PLC of Foundation Phase teachers. The Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community was investigated in-depth to examine the nature of teacher learning and the kinds of teacher knowledge learned by teachers. Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to generate the data for the study. I employed semi-structured interviews as they allowed me to ask probing questions during my engagement with the FP teachers. The semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to tell stories about their experiences and perceptions of the nature of learning activities in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community. Observations were also used to generate data. I observed PLC workshops and meetings as the government relaxed the COVID-19 restrictions. Gorman et al. (2005, p. 40) define observation as involving “the systematic recording of observable phenomena or behaviour in a natural setting”. Purposive sampling was used to select five (5) participants for the study, namely, one (1) PLC Coordinator, two (2) experienced teachers (with five and more years of teaching experience) and two (2) novice teachers (with one to two years of teaching experience). As pointed out by Maree (2007, p. 79) purposive sampling was used in “participants are selected because of some defining characteristic that makes them the holders of data needed for the study”.

1.10 Data analysis

Rule and John (2011) assert that data analysis is a process of arranging data into categories and patterns, which is then interpreted to make sense of it. The purpose of data analysis is to determine patterns, concepts, themes and meanings from the responses of the participants. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 535) concur that data analysis involves “organising, accounting for and explaining the data, in short, making sense of data”. Interviews and observation data were analysed using a deductive analysis, whose aim was to generate and examine findings about predetermined concepts from the literature to provide overall direction to the analysis.

1.11 Overview of the chapters

The dissertation comprised five chapters, whose content is summarised below.

Chapter One commences with an introduction, followed by a discussion of the background of the study, purpose and focus of the study. Following to this the rationale and the importance of this study are explained. This is followed by the presentation of the key research questions that this study sought to address and the objectives to be achieved. A summary of the literature review, conceptual framework and the research design and methodology for the study is also presented in this chapter. The chapter concludes with an overview of the five chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter Two presents the literature review on teacher professional development, teacher learning and professional learning communities. The chapter also provides the conceptual frameworks for the study namely; Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning activities and Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge.

Chapter Three presents and discusses the research design and methodology that was used in the study. The sampling of participants is discussed and the methods used to collect data, namely, semi-structured interviews and observation. Data analysis, issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Four presents, analyses, discusses and interprets the data generated. The conceptual frameworks discussed in Chapter Two are used to analyse the data.

Chapter Five, which is the last chapter, presents a summary of the key findings according to the three key research questions for the study. The chapter concludes with conclusions, recommendations, ideas for future research and concluding comments.

1.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I began with an introduction to the study and outlined the background of the study. I highlighted the purpose and focus of the study, followed by the rationale of the study. The chapter also included a short discussion of the literature review, conceptual framework and research design and methodology. The chapter concluded with an overview of the chapters for the dissertation.

Chapter two presents the literature review and conceptual framework for the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I review international and local literature regarding teacher learning in PLCs. The chapter is organised into key sections regarding the phenomenon under investigation, namely, professional development, teacher learning and professional learning communities. The chapter concludes with a presentation and discussion of the conceptual frameworks adopted for the study.

2.2 Professional Development

Generally, the notions of teacher professional development and teacher learning are used interchangeably, yet they have different meanings. Evans (2002) has also noted that the concepts of professional development and teacher learning are often used interchangeably by different researchers. For Evans (2002), however, professional development refers to broader changes that may take place over a longer period, resulting in qualitative shifts in aspects of teachers' professionalism (Fraser et al., 2007). Similarly, Thaver (2011) and Bertram (2011) contend that professional development is perceived as an organised and formal process that may change practice over a certain period and influence teacher professionalism. Concerning teachers' work, Desimone (2009) contends that teacher professional development is critical for bringing about positive change in teaching and learning and can contribute to improved learner achievement. According to Day (1999), teacher professional development is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purpose of teaching, and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their lives. Day's (1999) explanation has elevated key characteristics of the professional development of teachers participating in the process as well as individual teacher development.

Sometimes professional development is referred to as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or In-Service Education and Training (INSET). UNESCO's International Institute for Education and Training (2003) pointed out that professional

development is more than career development. For them, professional development involves both informal and formal experiences (UNESCO International Institute for Education and Training, 2003). Informal experiences may include watching professional documentaries and reading professional publications, and formal experiences, including tertiary courses, workshops, mentoring and conferences. Researchers such as Hargreaves and Giles (2003) contend that teachers bring knowledge, skills, and dispositions during professional development activities to promote shared learning and improvements. Noonan (2018) supports the view that professional development is a shared event, with teachers occupying the same learning environment and encountering the same material. Furthermore, Noonan (2018) asserts that professional development (PD) can be understood as activities or relationships whose intention is to support and develop teachers' instructional practice. For Mokhele (2013), CPD is the most useful method for improving teachers' instructional and classroom practices.

On the other hand, Guskey (2000), Desimone (2011) and Opfer and Pedder (2015) argue that professional development is time-consuming. Hence, Avalos (2010) asserts that for effective professional development to happen, time must be allocated to allow for collegiality, and collaborative activities, such as team teaching, planning, demonstration and reflecting. All these activities contribute to teacher professional development. Hargreaves and Giles (2003) and Avalos (2010) contend that PD has a positive impact on the teachers' work, both in and outside of the classroom. In respect of this study, for professional development activities to be effective, PD activities must create a collaborative learning environment and be specific to the needs of the Foundation Phase teachers; bring about a positive change in the classroom and encourage teachers to reflect on their practice; and must modify the Foundation Phase teachers and their peers as well as their practices (Carlisle et al., 2011; Rutgers, 2012).

There are different types of PD models. Kennedy (2005) classifies PD models into seven categories, namely, training, cascade, award-bearing, deficit, standards-based coaching, communities of practice and action research. In South Africa, in respect of curriculum reform that happened after the first democratic elections, the training and cascading models were mostly used to introduce teachers to the new curriculum called Outcomes-Based Education (OBE). This training model was administered and carried

out in a form of a workshop. A cascade model of training is often regulated externally by the DBE. Gert et al. (2001, p. 920) define a workshop “as a structured approach to professional development that occurs outside the teacher’s classroom”. In this regard, a workshop often involves a leader or leaders with expertise and the participants who attend the sessions at scheduled times after school, on weekends or during school holidays. Hoban (2002) contends that this training model is an effective means for introducing teachers to new knowledge. For example, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has run several workshops in this way, focusing on the teaching of the new curricula.

The cascade model of training has serious shortcomings though. For instance, this model often places teachers in a submissive position as beneficiaries of specific knowledge (Hoban, 2002). This is because teachers are often required to attend the training and then come back to the school to transmit the information to their colleagues who did not attend the workshop. Kennedy (2005) contends that the cascade model falls within the technician view of teaching, in which skills and knowledge are prioritised over attitudes and values. In my view, a single workshop, with no recurring support, may not always contribute effectively to teacher knowledge which may result in the improvement of the performance of learners.

Another PD model is the award-bearing model, which provides teachers with some form of accreditation after the successful completion of a formal course of study (Kennedy, 2005). According to Kennedy (2005), the award-bearing model often requires external validation to guarantee its quality assurance. This suggests that this aspect of the award-bearing model may be related to the standard-based model. For instance, the standard-based model requires that specific standards must be set for teachers to meet. This implies that the standard-based model may constrain or restrict the teacher’s chances of participating in alternative forms of CPD. In other words, this may limit teachers’ initiative to take responsibility for their PD.

Next is the school-based model. This model of professional development has been used in many countries, including South Africa. Bantwini (2009), Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) and Guskey (2002) contend that teachers learn better if the learning relates to their contexts. Similarly, Cogill (2008) and Avalos (2010) assert

that teachers are more likely to improve their learning when there is sharing of ideas, teaching strategies and resources with their colleagues and peers within their teaching and learning contexts. The school-based model, therefore, has the potential to provide teachers with opportunities to collaborate, take decisions and own their PD. Examples of school-based professional development models are coaching and mentoring, action research and communities of practice. The school-based model allows teachers to self-inquire and reflect through collective work.

The coaching/mentoring model, as a form of school-based PD, is based on a range of philosophical premises. Kennedy (2005, p. 242) describes mentoring/coaching as a “one-on-one relationship between a novice and more experienced teacher which is designed to support Continuing Professional Development (CPD)”. Rhodes and Beneicke (2006) differentiate between coaching and mentoring, suggesting that coaching is more skills-based while mentoring involves an element of “counselling and professional friendship” (p. 242). In South Africa, scholars such as Mukeredzi, Mthiyane Bertram (2015) have argued “that mentoring is the single most powerful process in promoting competence and quality amongst teachers in Southern African schools” (p. 2). In my view, mentoring is a critical aspect of teacher learning, the phenomenon under investigation in this study, which can also happen within a professional group or community context. Kennedy (2005) contends that a community of practice often involves more than two people working openly. In this regard, members of a community must create their understanding of a combined operation. In this regard, the notion of a community of practice maybe a powerful site for transformation.

Action research, as a PD model, has been described as effective in allowing teachers space to ask critical questions regarding their practice (Kennedy, 2005). For this reason, action research has been regarded as transformative as it “involves the combination of processes and conditions that support transformative agenda” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 226). In South Africa, the Integrated Quality Management Systems (IQMS), now known as the Quality Management Systems, is the school-based professional development model (Education Labour Relations Council, 2020). The main aim of the QMS is to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. According to Education Labour Relations Council (2003), the Department of Education must

provide facilities and resources to support learning and teaching. This means that although QMS affords teachers the opportunity to take control of their PD, it requires the Department of Education to play its role in addressing the contextual issues that may impact teachers' abilities to engage effectively in CPD.

The CPD of teachers is at the core of ensuring that education reforms are productive. Hardwood and Clarke (2006) contend that the main purpose of education reform must be to enhance teacher performance and the learning of students. Moreover, Desimone, (2002, p. 86) argues that CPD programmes must improve teacher knowledge and instructional practice and these practices may include:

a focus content and how students learn the content, in-depth, active learning opportunities, link to high standards, opportunity for teachers to engage in leadership roles, extended duration and the collective participation of groups of teachers from the same school, grade or department (Desimone, 2002, p. 86).

From the above discussion, it is clear that teachers are the key to the effective implementation of the ever-changing curriculum and policies for the benefit of their learners. Thus, this study argues, for teachers to adapt to the critical education reforms, they must be provided with adequate opportunities and space for CPD to improve their skills, knowledge, attitude and beliefs.

2.3 Teacher learning

Defining teacher learning is complex. Kelly (2006) defines teacher learning as a process through which teachers move from being a novice to becoming experts. In this instance, teachers move from knowing ('known') to coming to know ('knowing') (Kelly, p, 505). This implies that teachers are in charge of the knowledge which they bring into their context. This knowledge includes teacher knowledge of and in practice. Similarly, Evans (2002) defines teacher learning as learning that changes an individual's knowledge and skills. In this regard, Fraser et al. (2007) contend that teacher learning constitutes a practice that may be intuitive or intentional, social or individual, and leads to specific changes in teachers' professional knowledge, skills,

ways of thinking or actions. In addition, Fraser et al. (2007) assert that teacher learning activities may be formal or informal, incidental or planned, and voluntary or compulsory. Informal activities often involve activities that may occur, for example, during staffroom conversations with colleagues and peers, and researching and finding teaching resources on the books or the internet. Fraser et al. (2007) thus contend that teachers' professional learning can be defined as a process that results in specific changes to teachers' professional knowledge, actions, skills, attitudes and beliefs.

Kelly (2006) proposes two theories or approaches to understanding teacher learning, namely, cognitive and socio-cultural approaches. The cognitive learning theory asserts that knowledge and skills can be obtained from a particular learning environment and transferred to another (Kelly, 2006). On the other hand, the cognitive approach asserts that teacher learning is primarily propositional (i.e. knowing what) from experts (Kelly, 2006), and as learning occurs outside the teacher's workplace, the contextual factors and dynamics are often neglected. The literature suggests that the transfer of knowledge to a different context is not simple, as it takes a long period for teachers to accurately apply knowledge with confidence in unfamiliar contexts (see, for instance, Adey et al., 2004; Bertram, 2011; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Day, 2004). Literature suggests that long-term, in-depth and environmentally-based activities from the professional development programmes may enable teachers to revamp the acquired knowledge in their practices.

The literature asserts that cognitive perspectives provide powerful understandings of the different approaches to teacher learning (see, for instance, Borko & Putman, 1996; Bransford et al., 1999; Candy, 1991; Putman & Borko, 2000). These scholars argue that, from a cognitive psychological perspective, learning does not only apply to student learning; it also applies to teacher learning. As a result of this new perspective on learning, practising teachers must learn new methods of teaching. According to Borko and Putman (1996), teachers must learn in the same way as students do, which learning requires teachers to establish their knowledge and manage their learning. Furthermore, Borko and Putman (1996) assert that active and constructive learning is strongly influenced by an individual's current knowledge and beliefs and is situated in particular contexts. However, Bransford et al. (1999) and Putman and Borko (2000) contend that, from a cognitive perspective, teacher learning does not take place only

through the transmission of knowledge, but must be facilitated through creating conducive learning environments in which teachers can take control of their learning (Kwakman, 2003).

The cognitive psychological perspective contends learning happens in settings outside classrooms because these are not considered appropriate for achieving learning goals. The literature suggests that the cognitivist model can be challenged as being “inadequate for understanding the complexity of teacher learning on a number of fronts” (Kelly, 2006, p. 506), as cognitivism advocates for a view of teacher expertise as residing entirely in the individuals’ minds and thus adopts a simplistic notion of teacher knowledge, which does not account for what Schön (1983; 1987) calls ‘knowledge-in-practice’ and Sternberg and Horvath (1999) ‘tacit knowledge’ or for a process of ‘knowing’ which is distributed (Pea, 1983) or stretched (Lave & Wenger, 1991) across people and settings. Secondly, in adopting a view of learning as acquiring knowledge, cognitivism fails to recognise a much closer and more complex relationship, in which knowing is distributed across teachers, students and resources such as books and computers, and learning is the movement from peripheral (i.e. novice) to full (i.e. expert) participation in the work of schools (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lastly, cognitivism ignores the wider social context in which teachers work and the perspectives they bring to their work, including their identities as teachers (Wenger, 1998; Wood et al., 2002).

Given the fact that the transfer of knowledge is problematic within the cognitive theory of teacher learning, a socio-cultural approach may be preferred as it posits that learning is a collaborative and recurring episode that should take place in the situation in which it is needed (Kelly, 2006). This proposes that even though cognitive learning is crucial, teacher learning provides a more social and collaborative dimension, whereby teachers build knowledge in their different contexts, according to their needs. Moreover, Putman and Borko (2000) suggest that a situated perspective of learning implies that “knowing and learning are situated in both physical and social context, social in nature, and distributed across” (p. 12).

Kelly (2006, p. 507) asserts that the socio-cultural approach to learning consists of five areas, namely, expert teachers; knowing in practice; teacher expertise; teacher

learning; and teacher identity. Expert teachers have an active and productive relationship with their knowledge-in and knowledge-of- practice (Schön, 1993, 1987). The process of knowing in practice does not reside within individuals; rather it is distributed among teachers, students and both conceptual artefacts such as models and theories, and physical artefacts such as books and computers (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Billett, 2001). Teacher learning is the movement of teachers from the peripheral (i.e. novice) to full (i.e. expert) participation in the specific working practices and their associated ways of knowing and thinking which define particular school circumstances (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teacher identities are significant and revealed in the stances teachers adopt in their working life (Wenger, 1998; Woods et al., 2002).

This study focuses on formal and informal learning activities. A group of researchers (Kennedy, Christie, Fraser, Reid, L., McKinney, Welsh & Griffiths, 2008) highlighted that formal ways of learning are not initiated by a teacher while the informal ways are established by the teachers. Planned opportunities can be formal or informal and planning needs to be arranged beforehand, whereas incidental opportunities are spontaneous, unstructured and unplanned teacher interactions. In this study formal activities take place in a learning community in the form of workshops where the activities are facilitated by an external agent; subject advisor. The informal activities take place off-PLC sites, where teachers have small talks and discussions with their peers after the meeting and on WhatsApp groups.

2.4 Professional learning communities

A Professional Learning Community is described as a place where a group of teachers with an interest in education meet and share their views and generate a collaborative culture of learning to improve learner performance (DuFour, 2004). Agreeing with DuFour (2004), Brodie (2019) defines PLCs as “the groups of teachers who come together to engage in regular, systematic and sustained cycles of inquiry- based learning, to develop their individual and collective for teaching to improve student outcome” (p. 222). Similarly, Thornton and Cherrington (2014) define PLCs as a group of teachers working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all their students (p. 94). Stoll et al. (2006) assert that PLCs offer

supportive and conducive environments for the continuing learning and development of teachers to ensure better learning and attainment for learners.

According to Wenger (1998), learning communities can be referred to as clusters of teachers working collectively and adjusting and developing their practice to meet the learning needs of their learners, which develops collaborative work cultures for teachers. In South Africa, “PLCs are communities that provide the setting and necessary support for groups of classroom teachers, school managers and subject advisors to participate collectively in determining their own developmental trajectories, and to set up activities that will drive their development” (Department of Basic Education (DBE) & Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2011, p.14). The definitions provided above underline the importance of collaborative learning among teachers as a way of improving the performance of teachers and learners. Stoll et al., (2006); DBE & DHET, 2011; Zulu & Mukeredzi, 2021), summarise the several features of PLCs in Table 2.1 below.

FEATURES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES	DESCRIPTION
Shared values and vision	All members concur on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring the learning of pupils, • quality teaching and learning, • taking ownership of the values which provide a framework for shared • collective ethical decision-making.
Size of a PLC	The size of a PLC is small.
Collective responsibility	Members come together to build a collective understanding of how to improve learners’ learning and determine their learning content.
Reflective professional inquiry	Members engage in professional inquiry about problems on the application of new knowledge teachers’ practices.
Collaboration	Members open up to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exchange help; • support; • peer learning; • team teaching; and • observing one another.
Regular meetings and workshops	Members meet formally or informally regularly.
Shared leadership	Leadership exercises power with and through members, autonomous decision-making with members.
Learning	PLC focuses on professional individual learning and group learning.

Table 2.1: Features of professional learning communities (Adapted from DBE & DHET, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006, in Zulu & Mukeredzi, 2021)

Thornton and Cherrington (2019), in their research study conducted in early childhood education (ECE) in New Zealand, assert that making time for professional talks, feedback, coaching, and mentoring are the most important characteristics of school-based PLCs that support mutual agreement. The findings of the study highlighted several challenges in the establishment of PLCs, including the “lack of induction for new members, staff changing membership, and lack of time for meetings, importance of relational trust for teachers to feel comfortable to engage in open discussion and reflection on their practices and the action of professional leaders” (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019, p. 420). In a study conducted in Israel, Schechter (2012) reported that the hierarchical levels of management that positioned senior managers in the centre hindered the sustainability of PLCs. However, a study that was conducted in China by Wong (2010, cited in Brodie 2019, p. 5) argued that collaborating to substantively shift teaching practices required strong leadership and external support. These findings suggest that the line of seniority in management must position themselves as educational leaders who can provide assets to support educational learning amongst their peers.

Another study conducted by Owen (2014) in Australia pointed out that:

the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs) has been indicated as effective in building skills and knowledge for working in innovative contexts across teacher and leader teams and networks, and also within online contexts and school and pre-service and postgraduate university study programs (Owen, 2014, p. 55).

The findings of the study suggest that consistency is a key characteristic of PLCs. For instance, participants who were working together regularly over an extended period tended to share values and vision, practical activities focused on student learning, taking an inquiry stance, being reflective and collaborating and sharing experiences. Even though different scholars differ regarding the classification of the characteristics of PLCs, it must be noted that for the establishment and sustainability of PLCs, certain features must be present.

In South Africa, the DBE and DHET published the ISPFTED (2015, p. 14), which defines PLCs “as the communities that provide the position of necessary support to the groups of teachers, school leaders, principals, and subject advisors to join together in determining their own development trajectories, and to design activities that will drive their development”. The ISPFTED states that PLCs were introduced to support teachers in their efforts to enhance their classroom practice and enable them to identify areas of concern and take control of their PD. Moreover, the ISPFTED underlines the fact that teachers must use the learning opportunities available within the PLCs to address their weaknesses. According to the DBE and DHET (2011), the main objectives of PLCs are to analyse the results of systematic assessments, such as the Annual National Assessments (ANA) and National Senior Certificate (NSC); develop an understanding of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements; learn how to interpret and use curriculum support materials; and work together to learn from video recordings of practice and other learning materials.

The findings of a study conducted by Brodie (2019) affirm the fact that the ISPFTED supports the formation of PLCs as a place for teacher development, with clear goals, characteristics and activities. Furthermore, the findings of Brodie’s (2019) study concur with the objectives of the ISPFTED, which positions teachers as agents, which means that they must take control of their development identify their areas of weakness and take advantage of the expertise within PLCs to address their difficulties. This argument implies that teachers must collaborate in the professional learning community as professional agents taking an active role in their learning.

The findings of the study by Brodie (2016) also highlighted the fact that numerous challenges are making it difficult for teachers to participate in PLCs. These included time, collaboration, leadership support and trust (Brodie, 2016). Brodie (2016) identifies time as a key challenge to the participation of teachers in PLCs. Brodie (2016) has pointed out that teachers have often opted to meet after school due to a lack of time during the day, which clashes with their personal needs and responsibilities. Time remained a major issue, even though teachers were aware of the usefulness of participating in PLCs (Brodie, 2016). Another factor was the inadequate support from school leaders. For instance, teachers reported a lack of support from their Departmental Heads, which resulted in them withdrawing from participating in PLCs

(Brodie, 2016). Lack of trust amongst members of PLCs was another major challenge. For instance, teachers often experienced a fear of being judged especially because activities were often video recorded (Brodie, 2016).

Several initiatives have been implemented in South Africa to make PLCs functional as a mechanism for enhancing professional learning. A lesson study that was piloted in Motheo District in Free State Province involving teachers from the Foundation Phase (FP) and Intermediate Phase (IP) revealed that PLCs were regarded as a useful vehicle for enhancing continuing professional development (Letloenyane & Jita, 2020). This suggests that PLCs are regarded as a useful platform for professional development compared to once-off professional development initiatives.

My interest was in the findings, particularly regarding the Foundation Phase group because my research study focused on teachers in the Foundation Phase. The findings of the study revealed, for instance, that the Foundation Phase group demonstrated mutual trust because they had known each other for a while. Moreover, the findings of the study revealed that through teamwork, the teachers had gained significant improvements in their teaching practice, which was evident when teachers could apply teaching methods and strategies in their classrooms. The participants from the Foundation Phase group reported that their teaching practice had improved because they had created bonds of support among themselves. Lastly, the findings of the study suggest that the Foundation Phase group further communicated after the sessions. This was important as mentioned by one participant who stated that in their group they never experienced any withdrawal from participation. These findings suggest that PLCs may be useful in fulfilling the objectives of the sector and as an effective way of doing professional development.

The findings of the study conducted by the Free State Department of Education (FSDOE) pointed out that distributed leadership were observed. The members of the PLCs assumed a leading role, such as leading discussions, time keeping and managing records. The findings emphasise the importance of affording members an equal opportunity during the PLC meetings and workshops. The Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) Foundation Phase (FP) Training Manual, outlines the PLCs Coordinator's role as responsible for logistical

arrangements. The FP Training Manual (2022) underlines the necessity of rotating the roles within a PLC to allow each member an opportunity to lead.

However, Brodie and Borko (2016) argue that since the launch of the plan presented through the ISPFTED in 2011, the establishment and implementation of the notion of PLCs have been minimal and PLCs are mostly poorly structured to perform the intended functions, with the inconsistency and some pockets of distinctions. The research study proposed that the provincial departments, stakeholders, key role-players and DBE need to play a stronger stimulatory and supportive role for the PLCs to be more effectively operational and for the teachers to grasp the concepts of PLCs. While the notion of PLCs is growing in South Africa, Foundation Phase teachers' PLCs have not received much attention. Hence, this study is focussing on Foundation Phase teachers in PLCs.

2.5 Conceptual frameworks

The study adopted two conceptual frameworks, namely, Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning activities and Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge.

Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning activities

The literature reveals that the professional development perspective and traditional professional activities are insufficient for assisting teachers to learn to teach for understanding. The traditional ways of learning which are characterised by the transmission of knowledge can miss the mark. Teachers must acquire the skills that can help them to fulfil new roles. The working context is suggested as the most qualified place as the new teaching practices can only be achieved in practice (Hargreaves, 1997). The professional perspective posits that teachers are key in their learning and favours professional communities as a space for effective learning in addition to learning that takes place in the workplace. Kwakman's (2003) professional learning activities categories are represented in Table 2.2 on the next page.

CATEGORIES	PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES
Reading	Studying subject matter literature, reading professional journals, studying teacher manuals, reading newspaper
Experimenting	Helping students learn skills; preparing lessons individually; experimenting with new teaching methods; constructing lesson materials; Constructing tests; working with new methods
Reflecting	Supervising student teachers; receiving coaching and guidance; coaching colleagues; receiving pupil's feedback
Collaborating	Storytelling; Help: asking for help; giving help; sharing materials; ideas about innovation, instructional issues; ideas about pupil counselling; ideas about education; joint work; coordination; joining committees; preparing lessons; implementing innovations
Non- fitting into categories	Counselling pupils; executing non-mural tasks; performing management tasks; organising extracurricular activities for pupils; classroom interaction with pupils; teaching itself

Table 2.2: Kwakman's (2003) professional learning activities

The four main categories of professional learning activities mainly show the activities that teachers participate in during their daily work. The category that is referred to as non-category acknowledges participation in professional learning activities that takes place beyond the main category. Kwakman's (2003) professional learning activities are appropriate because this study sought to understand the nature of learning activities in the PLC for teachers in the Foundation Phase. The study further sought to examine how teacher learning occurred in a PLC for teachers in the Foundation Phase. These concepts were useful for understanding the learning activities in a PLC for teachers in the Foundation Phase.

2.5.1 Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge

Grossman (1990) identifies four general areas of teacher knowledge, which can be regarded as the cornerstone of the emerging work on professional knowledge for teaching, namely, general pedagogic knowledge, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of the context (Grossman, 1990, p. 5). The concept of 'teacher knowledge' emerged from Shulman's work in the early 1980s. Shulman (1987) suggested that there are seven categories of teacher knowledge, namely, knowledge of content, knowledge of pedagogy, knowledge of curriculum, knowledge of learners and learning, knowledge of context, pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of educational aims. Verloop et al. (2001, p. 443), furnished an all-encompassing definition of the teacher knowledge base as "all profession related insights that are potentially relevant to the teacher's activities". Along similar lines,

Ben-Peretz (2011, p. 8) motivated by Grossman and Richet's study in 1988, expands on the definition of teacher knowledge by breaking it down to a body of professional knowledge that encompasses both knowledges of general pedagogical principles and skills and knowledge of the subject matter to be taught. Wood and Bennet (2000), in their study based on early childhood, defined teacher knowledge as a set of diverse aspects of the teachers' work, which forms an ideology or theory and agencies. In this regard, Wood and Bennet (2000) infer that such a set of knowledge consequently influences a teacher's teaching practices and learners' performance.

Research scholars have different views about types of teacher knowledge (see, for instance, Adler, 2002; Ball et al., 2008; Connelly & Clandinin, 1994; Grossman, 1990; Gurrhahy, Cothran & Kulinna, 2005; Hashweh, 2005; Hill, Schilling & Ball, 2004; Maistry, 2008; Nieto, 2003; Shulman, 1986,1987; Zembylas, 2007). In her study, Zulu (2017) pointed out there is a large body of literature on teacher knowledge showing that researchers have built views about teacher knowledge based on Shulman's (1986) work. Moreover Zulu (2017) mentioned that this is noticeable from the work of Grossman (1990), Taylor (2013) and Taylor et al. (2013). Zulu (2017) also emphasised that the aforementioned scholars have demonstrated the relationship between Shulman's (1986) domains of teacher knowledge and other types of teacher knowledge. Zulu (2017, p. 58) has also provided an example of Taylor (2013), who maintained that Shulman's (1987) content knowledge corresponds with what they call disciplinary knowledge.

In this study, I employed Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge to analyse the kinds of teacher knowledge that teachers acquired. The focus of the study was on Foundation Phase (FP) teachers. The FP teachers teach all four subjects, namely, IsiZulu, English, Life Skills and Mathematics. Therefore, the issue of subject specialisation is not a consideration in Foundation Phase. This model of teacher knowledge was useful for exploring the kinds of teacher knowledge Foundation Phase teachers learned in their PLC. Figure 2.1 on the next page shows Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge.

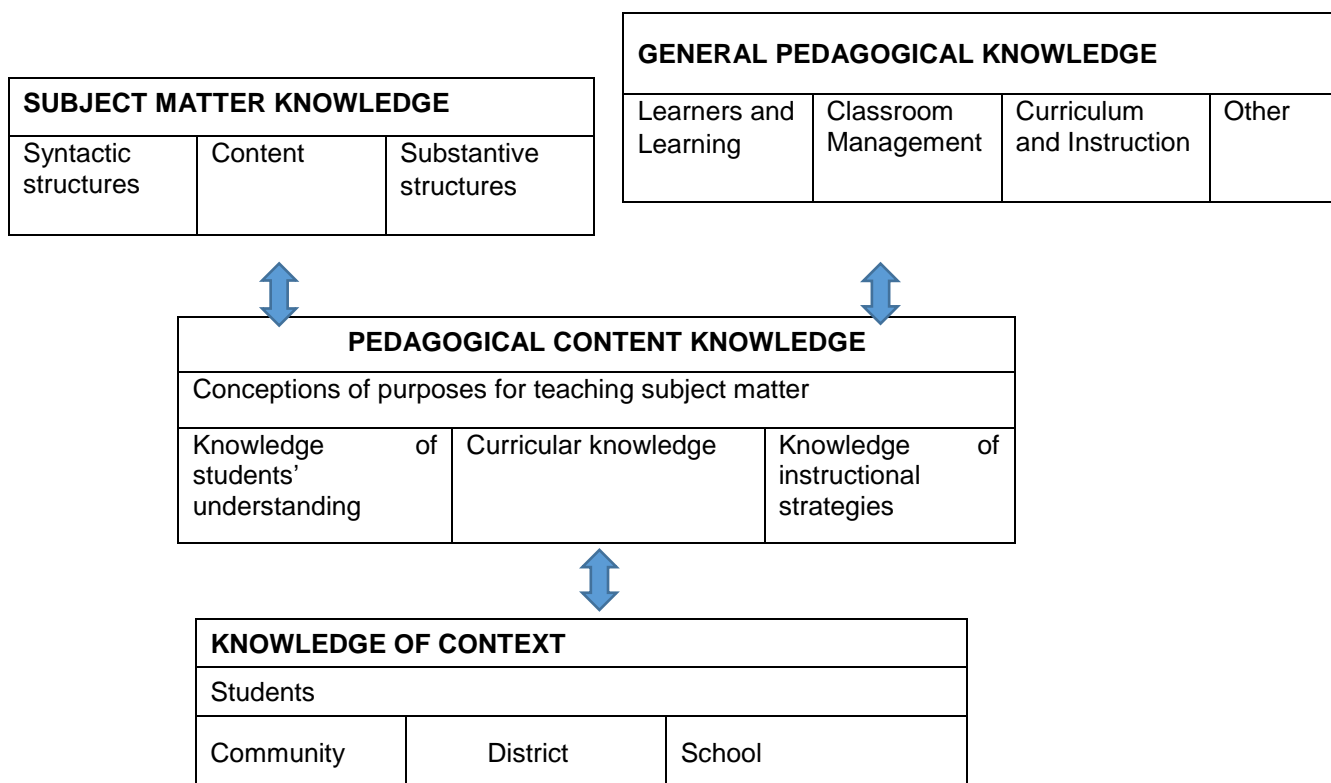


Figure 2.1: Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge

2.5.1.1 Subject matter knowledge

Subject matter knowledge is regarded as an important component of the knowledge base of teaching. Subject matter knowledge includes the knowledge of the content of a subject, as well as knowledge of substantive and syntactic structures of the discipline (Grossman, 1990, p. 5). For teachers to teach a specific subject and understand the structures of the subject, they must possess subject content knowledge. “Teachers’ knowledge of the content to be taught also influences what and how they teach” (Shulman & Grossman, 1990, p. 7). Teacher content knowledge also helps the teacher to select, choose and evaluate teaching resources, such as textbooks, charts, counting materials and or software programmes that are useful for the subject. Many scholars researching the field of teacher development emerged from Shulman’s (1986) teacher knowledge areas. Shulman (1986, p. 9) describes the concept of content knowledge as “the amount of and organization of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher”. Bertram (2011) explains the importance of teacher content knowledge as a profound understanding of concepts in their subjects, which is not just pieces of collected information.

2.5.1.2 General pedagogical knowledge

General pedagogical knowledge “includes a body of general knowledge, beliefs and skills related to teaching: knowledge and beliefs concerning learning and learners; knowledge principles of instructions” (Grossman, 1990, p. 6). Bertram (2011) defines general pedagogic knowledge as a complex set, consisting of classroom management and organisation, different teaching strategies, assessment strategies, and understanding of classroom communications and discourse.

2.5.1.3 Pedagogical content knowledge

Shulman (1987) states that teachers draw upon both subject matter knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge for their teaching. Shulman (1987) has termed the combination of the above-knowledges as the knowledge of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (PCK). Additionally, Shulman (1987) asserts that “PCK also includes an understanding of what makes learning of specific topics easy or difficult; the conceptions and pre- conceptions that students of different ages and back- grounds bring with them to the learning of those most frequently taught topics and lessons” (Shulman, 1987, p. 9). Grossman (1990) proposes that “pedagogical content knowledge includes knowledge of the most regularly taught topics in one’s subject area, the most useful forms of presentations of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations- in a word or ways of presenting and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible” (Grossman, 1990, p. 7).

The PCK consists of four central components:

- The first component consists of knowledge and beliefs about teaching the subject in different grades and to reflect on the teacher’s goals. Concerning this study, an example is that teachers in the Foundation Phase can move within the phase. This means that those teachers who are teaching Grade 1 can move to Grade 2 in the following year, which depends on the school curriculum management plan.
- The second component comprises the knowledge of students’ understanding, conceptions and misconceptions about a particular subject matter, and student strategies to solve problems. For example, in Foundation Phase in isiZulu and

English, learners learn using pictures in reading activities so that they can predict what the story may be about.

- The third component of PCK includes knowledge of curriculum materials or resources available for teaching. In Foundation Phase, teachers teach all subjects for example in Mathematics in Foundation Phase teachers uses concrete objects such as counters; bottle caps, and beans to help learners to count properly. Also, in languages, namely, IsiZulu and English, and Life Skills, teachers may use real objects, such as dolls or even pictures, for manipulation.
- The fourth component of PCK includes knowledge of instructional strategies and the representations for teaching particular subjects, such as modelling, games and role play.

2.5.1.4 Knowledge of content

The knowledge of the context which is the final domain for teacher knowledge draws upon the understanding of the particular context by the teachers, the general knowledge of specific school settings and individual students (Grossman, 1990). The knowledge of the context includes “knowledge of the districts in which teachers work, including the opportunities, expectations, and constraints posed by the districts; knowledge of the school setting, including the school “culture”, departmental guidelines, and other contextual factors at the school level that affects instruction; and knowledge of specific students and communities, and students’ backgrounds, families, particular strengths, weaknesses, and interests” (Grossman, 1990, p. 9).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed the literature regarding professional development, teacher learning and professional learning communities. The chapter further presented and discussed the conceptual framework underpinning the study, namely, Kwakman’s (2003) categories of professional learning activities and Grossman’s (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge.

The following chapter presents and discusses the research design and methodology for the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented and discussed a literature review regarding professional development, teacher learning and professional learning communities, including the conceptual framework for the study. In this chapter, I explain the research design and methodology of the study regarding the nature of teacher learning in a PLC for Foundation Phase (i.e. Grade R-3) teachers. The chapter begins by presenting the research paradigm. Then, I describe the research approach that was used for the study. This is followed by a discussion of the research design of the study. Fourthly, I present and discuss the methods used to generate the data to respond to the key research questions of the study. This is followed by a section in which I describe data generated were analysed, followed by a discussion of I ensured trustworthiness in the study. Lastly, I discuss considerations made to ensure that the study adhered to ethical research conduct.

3.2 Research paradigm

A paradigm is a lens through which people view their world and ask questions about the purpose, motivation and expectation of their research (Cohen et al., 2011). There are different examples of paradigms, namely, posit-positivist, constructivist, interpretive and critical paradigms (MacKenzie & Knipe, 2006). Each of these research paradigms has a particular way of seeing and interpreting the world or reality. The interpretive research paradigm seeks to understand and interpret the world concerning its thespian, and the critical paradigm studies sets of ethical principles to transform or change society. The post-positivist research paradigm endeavour for objectivity, predictability, patterning and the construction of rules and laws of behaviour.

By employing the relevant paradigm from the beginning of the research study, a researcher builds up a concrete and solid foundation based on their decisions about approaches and modes of enquiry (Kimathi, 2017). In agreeing with Kimathi's (2017) sentiment, I opted to employ the interpretivist paradigm, which is typical in qualitative

methodologies. The interest of this study was the interpretation of subjective experiences of individuals, which were Foundation Phase teachers in Linda District². The interpretive paradigm accommodates multiple meanings and is more explanatory than casually focused (Maree, 2007). In line with Maree (2007), this study is grounded on the ontological assumption that there are multiple realities, which are socially constructed and subjective. The epistemological foundation for this study is that knowledge is gained through the construction of realities and is shaped by the collaboration between researchers and participants (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007). The relationship between myself and the participants allowed me to understand their experiences from their perspectives.

Bertram and Christiansen (2014, p. 26) argue that “researchers do not aim to predict what people will do, but rather to describe and understand how people make sense of their worlds and how they make meaning of their particular action”. Since, for this study, the intention was to explore teacher learning of Foundation Phase teachers in a PLC, the interpretive paradigm was appropriate in that it allowed me to interact with the participants enabling their realities to be contextually subjected and constructed. Cohen et al. (2014) support this when they assert that an interpretive researcher wants to understand the explanation of the world around them. Furthermore, Mertens (2005) contends that the interpretivist paradigm is socially constructed, which means context is important as it reflects on the participants’ backgrounds and experiences.

3.3 Research approach

There are three research approaches, namely, qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches (Creswell, 2014). In differentiating between types of approaches, Creswell (2012) shows that quantitative research is best suited for research problems involving numerical data. In the mixed method approach, qualitative and quantitative methods are combined within one study (Ivankova et al., 2007). The mixed method approach collects both quantifiable variables and categorical variables. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the qualitative research approach studies activities in their natural settings and tries to make sense of and interpret meanings people bring to their situations.

² Pseudonym

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore and interpret the nature of teacher learning in a PLC of teachers in the Foundation Phase. The Foundation Phase teachers, who were the participants in this study, were studied in their context or natural setting (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I was interested in the participants' meanings, how they made sense of their learning, what their experiences were and how they interpreted their learning. In line with Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the adoption of the qualitative research approach enabled me to use semi-structured interviews and observations to generate data to respond to the key research questions.

3.4 Research design

The study adopted a case study research design (Rule & John, 2011). The literature suggests multiple definitions and understandings of the case study (see, for instance, Yin, 2003; Rule & John, 2011). Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not evident. Rule and John (2011) describe a case study as a systematic and in-depth examination of a particular case in its situation. For this study, the use of a case study intended to generate a rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For example, this study investigated teacher learning in a PLC of teachers in the Foundation Phase. The case in this study was the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community (a single case) and the phenomenon was teacher learning. The Foundation Phase PLC was investigated in-depth to examine the nature of teacher learning and the kinds of teacher knowledge learned by Foundation Phase teachers within the context of their PLC.

The literature suggests that the key strength of the case study research design is that it employs various sources and styles in the data generation process. Niewenhuis (2010) asserts that the strength of a case study is that it uses various methods of collecting data. Similarly, Yin (2012) asserts that the case study research design is useful as it allows the researcher to form a close relationship with the participants while allowing them to tell their stories. Moreover, Yin (2012) concurs that a case study also allows the participants to share their real-life experiences by telling stories and this assists the researcher to understand the participants' behaviour. Niewenhuis (2007, p. 76) has

levelled criticism against the tendency of the case study research design to depend on a single case and be unable to provide a generalisable conclusion. Furthermore, Rule and John (2011) concur that the exclusion of numerical generalisability in a case study research design could limit the extent of the findings of the study to be applied to other situations.

3.5 Selection of the participants

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Purposive sampling means that the “participants are selected because of some defining characteristic that makes them the holders of the data needed for the study” (Maree, 2007, p. 79). Similarly, Bertram and Christiansen (2014, p. 60) assert that purposive sampling means that the researcher makes specific choices about which people, groups or objects to include in the sample. Furthermore, Niewenhuis (2007) argues that purposive sampling decisions are not restricted to the selection of the participants, but also involve natural settings, incidents, events and activities that must be included for data collection. Qualitative research usually involves smaller sample sizes. Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study because I wanted to interview knowledgeable participants who had a deep understanding of the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community.

This study was conducted in the lower Bushman Circuit³ in Linda District⁴. The Foundation Phase teachers in Linda District came from eight (8) primary schools. Five (5) teachers were selected to participate in the study, namely, two (2) novice teachers (with one to two years of teaching experience); two (2) experienced teachers (with five and more years of teaching experience) and one PLC Coordinator, who was a member of the PLC. These five teachers were interviewed as participants and were selected as a result of their interest in the study and in-depth knowledge of the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community. Inclusion of participants in this study was based on the focus of the study; it was only the FP teachers who were the members of PLC that were included in this study. These FP teachers were members of lower Bushman Circuit in Linda district. The years of their teaching experience was considered in the selection of participants who were interviewed to gain more insight of how teacher

³ Pseudonym

⁴ Pseudonym

learning happened in this selected FP PLC. The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. Table 3.1 below presents the biographical details of the participants.

PARTICIPANTS⁵	GENDE R	GRADES TAUGHT	TEACHING EXPERIENCE (YRS)	POST LEVEL	NO. OF YEARS IN FP	Participants' schools (Pseudonyms)
Zobuhle	Female	1	2	PL1	2	Little House Primary
Rebecca	Female	3	12	Department al Head (DH) PL2	12	Nkanyezi Primary
Tamaga	Female	2	6	Department al Head (DH) PL2	6	May-Flower Primary
Tyrene	Female	1	3	PL1	3	Kusaselihle Primary
MaHlomu	Female	2	10	PLC co- ordinator PL1	10	Majuba Primary

Table 3.1: Biographical details of the participants who were the members of the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3) Professional Learning Community

3.6 Methods of collecting data

Generally, interpretivist researchers use a wide range of data-collection methods and techniques, such as interviews, artefacts, document analysis, photographs, drawings, personal journals, observations, etcetera, depending on the nature of the participants and the design of the study (Cohen, et al., 2011). In this study, I used two data collection methods, namely, semi-structured interviews and observations, which are discussed in the section below.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview is commonly used in research studies to corroborate data emerging from other data sources (Maree, 2007). The reasons for using semi-structured interviews (Refer to Appendix A for an interview schedule) stemmed from the fact that this type of interview allowed me to ask questions face-to-face with the participants. Maree (2007) states that the research interview is a two-way conversation between an interviewer and the participants whereby the participant is asked questions to generate data and, therefore, learn about the participants' opinions, views, ideas,

⁵ Not their real names

beliefs and behaviours. Similarly, Kvale (2006) has defined semi-structured interviews as an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life worlds of the participants regarding the meanings they ascribe to their realities. The interviews were conducted in English and over weekends and holidays. After receiving consent from the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded. However, to capture the aspects that are impossible to audio-record and to afford me time to listen to the participants, I took notes. The audio-recordings were later transcribed verbatim.

The advantages of conducting a face-to-face interview lay in that it enabled me to gain the participants' cooperation by establishing a relationship with them (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Within this study, initiating positive relationships enabled me to gain more information and generate accurate data. Another advantage of using semi-structured interviews was that the participants were asked the same core questions, which afforded me the freedom for asking follow-up or probing questions. In this regard, I used Brenner's (2006) view that interviews allow the participants to build on their responses.

In contrast, Leedy and Ormrod (2001) have argued that semi-structured interviews often rely on the interviewer's skills of asking questions and the self-expression of the participants. Therefore, there is almost always a risk that the researcher may mistakenly provide a signal that may lead a participant to provide the responses that they think are expected. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are time-consuming and costly, as transcription often requires a significant amount of time (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001).

3.6.2 Observations

Observation is defined as "a systematic process of recording the behavioural patterns of the participants, objects and occurrences, without questioning or communicating with the participants" (Niewenhuis 2007, p. 83). Furthermore, Niewenhuis (2007) points out that observation is a daily activity wherein people use their senses and their instincts to collect data. Initially, in the observation process as a researcher, I adopted a relatively passive role by not aggressively seeking data in the beginning, which could give rise to the behaviour for data collection. However, I followed the guidance that

qualitative researchers observe events as they occur in their natural settings. Since I am a member of the Foundation Phase PLC, I collected data using participant observation. In line with this Niewenhuis (2007) contends that if an observer is a participant, the researcher gets into the situation, but focuses mainly on their role as an observer in the situation. As the participant observer, I looked for patterns of behaviour in Foundation Phase PLC meetings and workshops to understand the assumptions, values and beliefs of the participants, but as a researcher, I remained relatively inactive and did not influence the dynamics of the setting.

The benefits of the observer as a participant are that this enables the researcher to establish a continuous behaviour as it takes place and the researcher can make appropriate remarks about its essential characteristics (Cohen et al., 2014). According to Niewenhuis (2007, p. 84), the risks of using observation as a data collecting method are its very nature as a highly selective and subjective device. This implies that researchers rarely observe the whole situation and often tend to focus on a specific event or aspect of the whole. However, as a member of the Foundation Phase PLC, I sometimes found myself intervening in some events because I was familiar with some of the events. It was also difficult for me to observe and write down notes at the same time.

3.7 Data analysis

Rule and John (2011) assert that data analysis is a process of arranging data into categories and patterns and later interpreting it to make sense of it. The purpose of data analysis is to determine patterns, concepts, themes, and meaning from the responses of the participants. This implies that data analysis is a process. In this regard, Creswell (2014, p.197) identifies seven steps involved in the analysis of data, as shown in Table 3.2 on the next page.

STEPS IN DATA ANALYSIS	DISCUSSION OF THE RELEVANT STEPS INVOLVED TO QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS CRESWELL (2014, p.197)
Step 1	Organise and prepare the data for analysis. This step includes transcribing the interviews, scanning material and field notes, and sorting and arranging the data into different types depending on the sources of information.
Step 2	Read through and familiarise yourself with the data. Determine the general ideas that the participants said.
Step 3	Start coding the data. Coding is the process of organising the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word that represents a chunk in the margin.
Step 4	Use the coding process to generate a description of the people and setting as well as categories of themes of analysis. Themes are the ones that appear as the major finding in the qualitative study and are used as the main headings in the study's findings.
Step 5	Discuss the descriptions and themes as a narrative passage to convey the finding of the analysis. Qualitative researchers use visuals such as graphs, figures or tables as adjuncts to the discussion.
Step 6	A final step in the data analysis involves making interpretations in qualitative research of the findings and results, asking questions such as what was learned? The interpretations can take many forms and be adapted for different designs and actions.
Step 7	Final interpretations and themes.

Table 3.2: Seven steps of data analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 197)

Firstly, I organised and explained the data and tried to make meaning of it regarding the responses of the participants. In this, I observed patterns, themes, categories and regularities (Cohen et al., 2011). This process was useful for reducing the data to make meaning thereof and understand what the participants were saying. Therefore, thematic analysis was used for the study. Kalof et al. (2008) contend that thematic analysis focuses on the analysis of the meanings of spoken and written words. Cohen et al. (2014) contend that inductive analysis is one of the primary processes of organising data into categories and identifying patterns amongst categories.

The data were generated from semi-structured interviews with five Foundation Phase PLC teachers and were transcribed from word to word into textual data. This was followed by coding and grouping emerging ideas. Lastly, the common ideas were grouped into themes. Themes were refined and used to provide an analysis of findings based on the key research questions. Data collected through unstructured observations of Foundation Phase PLC meetings and workshops were also analysed using thematic analysis.

3.8 Issues of trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a concept used by Guba and Lincoln (1990) cited in Creswell (2014) for qualitative research. According to Creswell (2014) trustworthiness refers to how the inquirer can persuade their audience that the findings of the study deserve to be paid attention to and that the research has met general quality standards. In this study, the following four principles were considered, namely, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

3.8.1 Credibility

According to Christiansen et al., (2014), credibility means that the findings reflect the realities and experiences of the participants. The principle of credibility was applied to the extent to which the findings of this study reflected the reality and experiences of the participants. This was achieved by double-checking the data analysis and discussing it with the participants for the verification of the researchers' understanding. Participant observations and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The interviews allowed the participants to show their feelings and participant observation allowed the researcher to experience the participants' context, which was the Foundation Phase PLC. The combination of the semi-structured interviews and participant observation assisted me to corroborate the data generated to enhance its credibility.

3.8.2 Confirmability

Confirmability means that the findings of the study can be verified by another study (Morrow, 2005). To enhance confirmability, the interview transcripts were given to the participants to verify whether their responses had been captured accurately.

3.8.3 Dependability

“Dependability refers to the degree to which a reader can be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher say they did” (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 2002, p. 64). This means that the data was checked and verified by my research supervisor to determine whether the findings of the study were supported by data.

Throughout the study, I worked closely with my supervisor to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

3.8.4 Transferability

Rule and John (2011) define transferability as the extent to which the findings of the research can be transferred to similar contexts. The study may require different methods of data collection to enhance transferability. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used to generate data for this study. The researcher used thick, rich descriptions of the participants and their contexts by providing detailed information.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Creswell (2014) states that it is important for every researcher to address issues of ethics when conducting a research study. In this regard, I requested and was granted permission (Refer to Appendix 1) to conduct research in schools by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. After obtaining the permission, I applied for and obtained ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, College of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Refer to Appendix 2). Hereafter, I approached the participants to request them to participate in the study. In this regard, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study; the information that would be required from them; how the information provided would be used; the timeframes for the study; and the implications for their participation in terms of their rights. The research ethical flow principles were considered, namely, informed consent, autonomy, non-maleficence (*not harm*) and beneficence (Cohen et al., 2014).

The consent of the participants is important. Participants were informed about what was expected from them. Upon agreeing to participate, the participants were requested to sign a consent form to indicate their agreement. However, the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were at liberty to withdraw their participation, should they feel the need to do so, and that there would be no penalty for doing so.

The participants' identities, profiles and school names were not used; instead, pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. In addition to this, all the information associated with the participants was password-protected and kept under lock and key. Where a third person, such as research assistance, was used, they were requested to sign a declaration of confidentiality to bar them from sharing the information relating to the study.

Next, non-maleficence, which means no harm to the participants was ensured (Cohen et al., 2014). Furthermore, non-maleficence required that I consider whether the study would do any emotional, social or physical harm to the participants. In this regard, I arranged for relevant services to be on standby, of which the participants were informed.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I described and justified the research design and methodology used to understand the nature of teacher learning activities in the PLC for teachers in the Foundation Phase.

The following chapter presents, discusses, analyses and interprets the data collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observations to respond to the key research questions of the study.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented and discussed the research design and methodology used in this study. In this chapter, I used the two conceptual frameworks by Kwakman (2003) and Grossman (1990) to present, discuss, analyse and interpret the findings of the study regarding teacher learning in the PLC with teachers in the Foundation Phase. At this point, it is important to remind the reader that this research study focused on Foundation Phase (i.e. Grades 1- 3) teachers in Linda District. The intention was to investigate the nature of teacher learning and how it occurred, as well as the kinds of teacher knowledge the teachers acquired by participating in their PLC. The study was foregrounded on the three research questions:

1. What is the nature of learning activities in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?
2. How does teacher learning occur in Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?
3. What kinds of teacher knowledge do Foundation Phase teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community?

4.2 Profile of the participants

Before the presentation and analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews with the five participants, I provide the profiles of the participants in the section below. However, in doing so, the participants' and schools' real names were replaced with pseudonyms.

4.2.1 Miss Zobuhle

Miss Zobuhle is a novice teacher. She is a Grade 1 teacher at Little House Primary School. Zobuhle is a professionally qualified teacher, who possesses a Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Education Honours degrees from the University of the Free State. Miss Zobuhle is a Post Level 1 (PL1) with two (2) years of teaching experience.

When Zobuhle explains her role in the PLC, she highlighted her interests regarding her participation in the PLC workshops and meetings:

I am a newly appointed educator, I like to go and attend PLC workshops and meetings because I am still unsure of what is expected from me.

4.2.2 Miss MaHlomu

Miss MaHlomu is a Grade 1 teacher at Majuba Primary School. She is a professionally qualified teacher, who possesses a National Diploma in Education (NPDE) and Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) from Northwest University. MaHlomu is a Departmental Head (DH) in her school and a Coordinator of the Foundation Phase PLC. She has 10 years of teaching experience. When I asked MaHlomu about her role in the PLC, her response was:

I have been a PLC Coordinator for almost 8 years now. I communicated with Subject Advisors who are the district officials. I share information with the PLC members. I collected resources such as Annual Teaching Plan from the Subject Advisors and distributed it to the schools and I make sure that all members received them on time. I am a facilitator in the PLC workshops or meetings and I also prepare the handouts and documents that we are going to use in our meetings.

4.2.3 Miss Tamaga

Miss Tamaga is a Grade 3 teacher at May-Flower Primary School. She is a professionally qualified teacher. She holds a National Diploma in Tourism from the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA). Miss Tamaga is a Departmental Head (PL2) with 6 years of teaching experience. She reported that she is a member of the PLC:

I am just a member of the Foundation Phase PLC. I do not have any specific role.

4.2.4 Miss Rebecca

Miss Rebecca is a Grade 2 teacher at Nkanyezi Primary School. She is a professionally qualified teacher, who possesses a Bachelor of Education degree, and Bachelor of Education Honours, which she obtained from the University of Zululand. Currently, she is doing her final year in the Masters of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Miss Rebecca is a Departmental Head (PL2) teacher with 10 years of teaching experience. She is the administrator of the WhatsApp group for the PLC. Miss Rebecca elaborates on her role of being a ‘group admin’:

I created a WhatsApp group for our PLC members, I add all members to the group so that they can easily access information related to FP issues and matters such as circulars, the invitation to meetings, and workshops.

4.2.5 Miss Tyrene

Miss Tyrene is a Grade 3 teacher at Kusaselihle Primary school. She is a professionally qualified teacher. Miss Tyrene possesses a National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) from the University of Zululand. She is a novice teacher with three years of teaching experience. Tyrene described herself as an active member of the Foundation Phase PLC:

I am an active member of FP PLC, I tried, by all means, to fully participate in PLC activities by positively contributing to the functioning of PLC by attending workshops even on WhatsApp I am not a ‘silent member’, I share my ideas, freely asks for help If am clueless on how to teach a certain topic.

4.3 Workshops of Foundation Phase PLC

Table 1 provides the schedule of Foundation Phase PLC workshops that were observed in 2022. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face workshops were administered with only a specific number of participants.

DATE OF THE WORKSHOP	NATURE OF THE WORKSHOP	SUBJECT/ LA	NO OF TEACHERS ATTENDED	FACILITATOR
14 February 2022	Reading Norms workshop; Group Guided Reading (GGR) Shared Reading	Languages: • IsiZulu HL • English FAL	25 teachers	Subject Advisor and PLC Coordinator (MaHlomu)
07 March 2022	WATERSMART ('be smart and safe around water')	Life Skills	18 teachers	Subject Advisor and PLC Coordinator (MaHlomu)

Table 4.1: Workshops for the Foundation Phase PLC

4.4 Data presentation and analysis

Data presentation and analysis in this section are organised into four themes, namely: Teacher learning in the Foundation Phase PLC; Teacher knowledge learned in Foundation Phase PLC activities; Challenges hinder Foundation Phase teachers' participation in the activities of the PLC; and Foundation Phase teachers' views on the role of the PLC.

4.4.1 Teacher learning in the Foundation Phase PLC

I use Kwakman (2003) to discuss the nature of teacher learning activities and how learning occurred in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community. The data from the semi-structured interviews and participant observation indicate that the workshops and online learning, such as WhatsApp groups, were the main programmes for Foundation Phase PLC in Linda District. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the online programme proved helpful as teachers could continue with their professional learning programmes. That is, it keeps the members' learning active and the PLC alive.

4.4.1.1 Reading

Reading is defined as both a cognitive-linguistic ability as well as a socially constructed form of human behaviour. During the workshop held on 14 February 2022, the Foundation Phase teachers participated in a reading activity, as Foundation Phase learners. During this session, their Subject Advisor provided them with an extract from a Grade 2 reader. The teachers, who were participants in this study, were requested to read the extract. The purpose of the reading activity was to develop the following

components of reading: phonemic awareness, word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary and fluency.

Furthermore, the data from the observation of the PLC workshops and interviews suggest that the participants were exposed to *shared reading*. As with the previous group, the participants were participating in the activity as Grade 2 learners. The *shared reading* involves the teacher reading aloud to the learners (fiction, non-fiction, poem or songs), making facial expressions associated with the action that is taking place in a story and changing the tone of voice to create a picture of what the story is about (Department of Basic Education, 2011). When MaHlomu, the PLC Coordinator, reported about the shared reading, she says:

Shared reading is challenging because we as teachers assumed that it allows 'chorus' reading, which is wrong! During this type of reading, learners need to take care of the vocabulary, read fluently with confidence, and be able to identify the sounds and words.

The shared reading activity was observed in the Foundation Phase PLC workshop that was held on 14 February 2022. 25 teachers attended the workshop. In the workshop, teachers read the extract from a Grade 2 reader. Teachers were divided into small groups of five (5). All group members read the extract aloud. However, the FP teachers were not grouped according to their reading ability. The Foundation Phase readers comprised a few pages. The title of the book was *Awu, Mnu Nkawu!* The cover page was colourful, with a picture of a monkey wearing a suit. Figure 4.1 below shows an extract used for the reading activity.



Figure 4.1: Extract for a reading activity: Reading comprehension

This activity was observed during the first observation of the Foundation Phase PLC workshop on the date mentioned on 14 February 2022. The Subject Advisor explained the importance of reading aloud as follows:

Reading aloud is essential for the beginner reader, in this case, the 'beginner reader' is our FP learner. So please teachers I am appealing to you, to teach your learners reading daily.

(14 February 2022)

The workshop mainly focused on teaching reading skills. Another activity that took place was Group Guided Reading (GGR). The components of this reading activity were similar to the reading activity (namely, shared reading) that was discussed above. This activity differed from the previous one in that for the GGR activity, only one teacher read in the group. The facilitator mentioned that the teachers were seated in groups. For this study, we will assume that they have the same ability as Grade 2

learners seated in their groups with the same ability. The same extract was used for the GGR reading activity. The facilitator, who was the Subject Advisor, outlined the steps that were involved in the GGR activity:

Colleagues, remember that learners with the same ability are grouped. We can do that by giving them an extract from their previous grade book. Firstly, show your learners a cover page just to remind them about the story. Then ask an individual learner to read about 2-3 lines and use a checklist to assess their reading ability.

Zobuhle a novice teacher reported:

During GGR activity, I noticed that the teachers read fluently and with speed, using the correct pronunciation.

Tyrene reported that:

This activity was an eye-opener because I was unable to differentiate between shared reading and GGR.

Rebecca mentioned that:

The GGR activity helped me a lot because now I know that even though learners are sitting in groups, each learner must read from their book and be able to read with an understanding and to use phonics and sight words.

The aforementioned reading activities seemed to be in line with the five features of the Foundation Phase curriculum, namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. According to the Department of Basic Education (2011), these features must be incorporated into the reading lessons for the Foundation Phase.

4.4.1.2 Experimenting

During the observations of the Life Skills workshop, held on 7 March 2022, I noticed that it was structured to allow the participants to engage in experimenting and modelling. The content was titled '*WATERSMART*' under the Life Skills learning area. The facilitator explained to the teachers that the main focus of this content was to teach learners about how to behave around water. The facilitator displayed the charts on the board to show the participants how to integrate '*WATERSMART*' content in the Life skills per grade across Foundation Phase. The facilitator then distributed documents to the teachers, one copy per school. She did that by calling the name of each participant's school and the relevant teacher would come to collect their copy. This activity took approximately five (5) minutes. The facilitator showed the participants the model of '*RESCI*', a two-litre bottle with a doll (shown in Figure 4.2), and a colourful cartoon of '*RESCI*', who is a lifeguard.

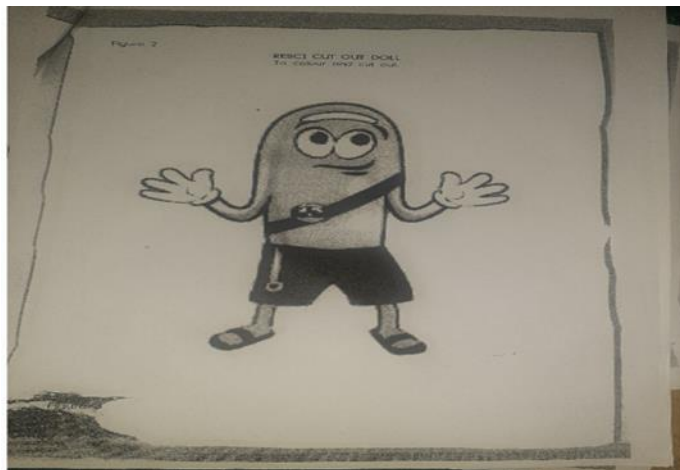


Figure 4.2: Model of RESCI doll

RESCI doll was displayed on the front desk. Teachers then opened their documents and learned that *RESCI* greeted learners in different languages saying:

Good morning (English), *Goeie more* (Afrikaans), *Sawubona* (IsiZulu),
Ola (Kasi Language), *Dumela* (Sesotho)

Teachers, while they greet each other, were pointing to the *RESCI* doll. Hereafter, the participants sang the *RESCI* rap while they were dancing. *RESCI Rap*:

Go RESCI, Go RESCI, RESCI is my man! (Repeat) He teaches us about water, to help us know what is right. He teaches us about water, to make sure we are safe. Go RESCI, Go RESCI, RESCI is my man! (Repeat)

After singing, teachers commented on their experiences of the activity. For example, Tamaga and Zobuhle mentioned that the activity was challenging. The following extract shows the concern raised by Tamaga, who said:

In my group, we were challenged to translate RESCI Rap because Life Skills in the Foundation Phase is taught in isiZulu, but the RESCI Rap poem was written in English! We struggled to translate the poem word for word into IsiZulu.

Zobuhle seemed to agree with what Tamaga said in terms of translating RESCI Rap poem from English to IsiZulu:

It took us some time trying to translate the poem into IsiZulu! We removed one English word and replaced it: For example, 'Go Resci- Hamba Resci'. Until the last word of RESCI RAP poem!

The facilitator also emphasised that the warning signs must also be demonstrated through the poem. She encouraged the participants to allow learners to listen to one of Resci's favourite poems. The above extracts from the observation notes seem to suggest that learning through the experiment is useful for learners because it helps them to understand what they are being taught.

4.4.1.3 Reflecting

Reflecting is crucial for learning. Valli (1993) demonstrates that teachers understand themselves better and improve their classroom practices when they are reflective. Reflecting allows teachers to develop an attitude of continuously examining their teaching practice and bringing about change in their school settings, their feelings and emotions. The teachers were reflecting on their challenges, which was evident from the observation extracts on experimenting about which the participants were

commenting. The two participants, who were newly appointed teachers, reflected on their feelings and thoughts as members of the Foundation Phase PLC. One of the participants, who was a Grade 3 teacher, Tyrene, said:

It helped me to change my teaching practice and there has been improvement in my grade three reading skills.

Zobuhle, a Grade 1 teacher, said:

I am feeling confident that I am taking responsibility for my teaching by choosing my classroom setting; chair and desk arrangements, pasting wall charts or pictures, seating plans; by alphabets or codes and gender.

These above quotes suggest instances of teacher learning (see, for instance, Kelly, 2006). Furthermore, as Kelly (2006) suggests, these pointed to the fact that teacher learning can happen individually, whereby teachers reflect on their practice.

4.4.1.4 Collaborating

The notion of collaborative learning is at the core of PLCs (Fullan, 2009; DuFour, 2004; Schmoker, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008). From the Foundation Phase PLC workshop observation, it was revealed from the experience of the participants who had been teaching in the Foundation Phase for many years that they were willing to share their experiences on how to support the learners who were experiencing learning difficulties. The sharing of experiences and ideas was observed during the isiZulu reading comprehension activity. There was a challenge on how to arrange desks during Group Guided Reading (GGR) activity. Then, the experienced teachers explained that the underlying factor for this activity was on individual learners, not the group, who read with fluency, phonics, sounds and words., even though they were sitting in groups. In this regard, Rebecca said:

I like how teachers are respecting one another; everyone is treated with respect. We get together to share ideas and create a spirit where all

teachers are not afraid to talk. We build a joint understanding of how learners learn.

However, MaHlomu was not specific about the activities that they had done collaboratively:

It is very useful to work as a group than individually because we make friends that we can rely on them even after the meeting. The learning occurs continued with small talk even when we saw each in the supermarkets.

Collaboration among teachers was observed in the workshops. Some teachers even grouped themselves with their friends from other schools. Teachers' cooperation and mutual trust, which are among the key characteristics of PLCs, were observed.

This section presented the analysis of data using Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning to investigate the nature of teacher learning activities of the Foundation Phase PLC and how teachers learned. The analysis through Kwakman's (2003) categories of professional learning suggests that teacher learning in the Foundation Phase PLC is an implicit way of implementing professional development.

4.4.2 What kinds of teacher knowledge are learnt in Foundation Phase PLC?

In this sub-section, I discuss the findings in terms of Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge, namely, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge and contextual knowledge, to explain the kinds of knowledge teachers learned by participating in the Foundation Phase PLC.

4.4.2.1 Subject matter knowledge

Grossman (1990) contends that teachers must have a knowledge and understanding of the subject structure to teach a specific subject. This type of knowledge is sometimes referred to as content knowledge. The subject in this study is also referred to as a learning area (LA). All the participants that were interviewed reported that the

activities of the Foundation Phase PLC helped them to gain confidence to teach different types of reading and understand the components of reading mentioned above. The activity was also observed in the Foundation Phase PLC workshop that was held on 14 February 2022. Teachers participated in the reading activities as Grade 2 learners. They read an extract from the Grade 2 book, attached in Figure 4.1 and table 4.1 above.

In this regard, Tyrene, a novice teacher, reported that:

I have learned the development of reading skills. Like book-handling skills, and interpretation of pictures. I didn't know of these reading skills. But now I know them.

Another novice teacher, Zobuhle, said:

I have learned that reading involves reading with fluency, pace and comprehension.

The findings of this study suggest that there was more focus on reading. As Bielby (1992, p. 2) eloquently puts it: "Reading is a complex process. It is not just about identifying words but it is also about understanding them. The process is not a one-way street - first we decode (translate the print into) the words, then we make sense of the. It is interactive. The sense of what we are reading sometimes helps us decoding – we are anticipating words" (Bielby, 1992, p. 2). Bielby's (1992) assertion was true for reading for the Foundation Phase teachers in this study.

4.4.2.2 General pedagogic knowledge

Grossman (1990) maintains that general pedagogic knowledge comprises broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organisation that go beyond subject matter knowledge. However, there was less focus on general pedagogic knowledge in the Foundation Phase PLC. This was supported by data collected from Foundation Phase teachers in Linda District through semi-structured interviews. All five participants reported that at their workshops the main focus was on content

knowledge whereby they learned different types of teaching methods. Teachers learned by demonstrating activities to draw learners' attention. However, two experienced teachers mentioned that classroom management, informal assessment, conducive learning space and learners' discipline were important for teaching and learning to occur. MaHlomu, a PLC Coordinator, reported that:

In my classroom, desks and chairs are arranged in a manner that allows free movement for me to monitor and provide support for all my learners. Because learner involvement is important, I use a checklist to assess my learners informally through active participation.

Rebecca, an ordinary PLC member, argued that classroom rules and a conducive environment were key tools for managing her classroom because, in Foundation Phase, learners learn through doing or demonstration:

I read classroom rules often to remind my learners of the do's and don'ts to prevent noise during story telling or Show and Tell activities in isiZulu and English. I remove broken chairs and desks to keep my classroom safe and tidy.

The above interview extracts reveal that there was less focus on the general pedagogic knowledge principles in the Foundation Phase PLC, even though the two participants pointed out that these were considered for classroom management.

4.4.2.3 Pedagogical content knowledge

In terms of PCK, Grossman (1990) suggests that teachers must be able to unpack the concepts by identifying the topics which may be difficult or easy for learners. PCK was at the core of knowledge in the Foundation Phase PLC in Linda District. This was evident from the workshops and interviews with the teachers in the Foundation Phase PLC. The participants reported that by attending the workshops they had gained knowledge on how to teach particular concepts with confidence. For example, Zobuhle reported about her learning on how to teach IsiZulu:

I learned about the visualisation teaching strategy, whereby you learn through 'seeing and interpreting'. For example, if you are introducing a new sound, you have to show learners flashcards of the letter or show learners pictures related to the new sound.

MaHlomu said:

I learned teaching methods like learner-centeredness whereby learners take full participation in the lesson guided by the teacher. For example, a Group Guided Reading (GGR) activity.

Moreover, MaHlomu elaborated on the teaching of phonics in IsiZulu Home Language (HL):

I also learned the phonic method strategy on which learners reading skills by firstly teaching them the alphabet using charts, real objects and or flashcards.

The above interview excerpts suggest an advocating for the fact that the PCK was learned to help learners to acquire knowledge on the concepts that are being taught and for their promotion and progression.

4.4.2.4 Knowledge of the context

Knowledge of the context involves an understanding of the community, district and school context of the learners that the teacher is teaching. This was evident from observations, which suggest that the Foundation Phase teachers had acquired contextual knowledge. During the workshop, MaHlomu, a PLC Coordinator, commented on the transformation of her school which was situated within a socioeconomically challenged context. MaHlomu was showing teachers how to use counters:

Teachers, please use the counters and encourage learners to bring different types of counters which could be natural resources, such as stones. The parents would not be stressed by buying counters.

This seems to relate to knowledge about the community, as it takes account of the socioeconomic context of the learners and their families, who may not afford to buy counters.

Tamaga commented about curriculum differentiation:

I have learned different types of teaching methods; differentiation emphasises the importance of that, as a teacher, I must always remember that learners are different. Therefore, as a teacher, I need to prepare a lesson that will accommodate their differences. Another teaching method was modelling whereby our little ones easily learn by coping with what you as the teacher are showing them or doing.

MaHlomu elaborated by displaying an understanding of her learners' context. In this regard, she explained how she provided individual attention to different learners in her Grade 1 class:

When I am conducting Group Guided Reading activities, other learners are doing other activities maybe activities on workbooks while I am focusing on a particular learner who is reading.

The above extracts from the two participants suggest that in the Foundation Phase teaches were learning about context knowledge, particularly differentiated teaching. This is in line with the inclusive education principle that “All learners are different and need support” (Department of Education, 2001, p.16) and the knowledge of the context of the parents and learners.

4.4.3 Challenges that hindered teachers' participation in the activities of the PLC

The participants highlighted different challenges that impeded their participation and the functioning of their PLC. These challenges included the COVID-19 pandemic, internet connection, teachers who chose not to participate in their WhatsApp group, lack of resources, lack of support in some schools, and the heavy workloads of teachers. All five participants raised concerns about COVID-19, in that it reduced their participation in PLC activities. For example, Zobuhle reported:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meetings and workshops were affected negatively. Instead of meeting four times a year face to face, we reduced it to twice a year. We are depending on the WhatsApp group for further discussions and communications.

Rebecca elaborated further:

These COVID-19 rules also require certain numbers to meet. It makes us unhappy because the circular or invitation to a meeting states that only one teacher attends a workshop. It left others behind and only depends on the feedback from the teacher who has attended. It's not always guaranteed that you will get the exact information that you have attended personally.

Zobuhle lamented about connectivity issues about which she said:

Sometimes, no one responds to your questions or query because of a poor network connection or just data has run out. Other teachers are not used to these online learning groups. They do not check their WhatsApp messages at all.

Furthermore, Tamaga expressed her concern that she could not apply what she had learnt in the PLC due to the shortage of resources:

Resources are a big challenge because you go to the workshop and do interesting activities but when you go back to your school. You can't do them because of a shortage of those resources such as reading books. You end up being demotivated because you feel that you are not growing."

When Rebecca expressed her views about inadequate support from the school, she pointed out that the school did not support and encouraged teachers to attend PLC meetings:

Some teachers believe that PLC meetings are a waste of teaching and learning time. Those teachers demotivate you from attending the PLC workshop. The circulars and invitation letters sometimes are not attended to.

Tyrene reported that attending PLC workshops was challenging due to the geographical location of her school, which was far from the venue of the workshops:

I do not have a car. I am depending on a taxi for transport, but I have to start at school and organise food for my learners before I can go to the meeting. Mind you, I am relying on a taxi! I will arrive an hour late, it's embarrassing.

MaHlomu concurred with the views of the other two participants regarding inadequate support received by teachers from their schools regarding the attendance of PLC workshops. She felt that the heavy teaching load was a big challenge:

Teachers have an enormous duty load which also demotivates them to participate in PLC activities. They do not have time at all. They feel that by going to attend PLC workshops they would have a backlog on their work schedule.

These challenges impacted the teachers' participation in the activities of the PLC, although they were aware that their involvement in the PLC activities was their major way of doing professional development. The aforementioned quotes affirm the

findings highlighted in Brodie (2016) that insufficient support from the Departmental Head is the main factor that hindered teacher's participation in PLC. Moreover, Brodie (2016) maintained that time is another factor because teachers find it impossible to attend PLC meetings after school hours because that they used time for their personal needs.

4.4.4 Foundation Phase teachers' views on the role of the PLC

Although the data shows that there were several challenges experienced in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community (PLC), there was some evidence suggesting that the participants valued the role of Foundation Phase PLC. For example, Tamaga, who was a member of the PLC, commented about the importance of the PLC for her learning and teaching practice:

I believed that I have grown a lot after I participated in the Foundation Phase PLC workshops. I have learned different teaching methods.

Zobuhle, a novice teacher with two (2) years of teaching experience, reported factors that motivated her to participate in the PLC:

I gain more knowledge about teaching and learning from experience teachers and put theory into practice.

MaHlomu, the PLC Coordinator, provided her views about her participation in the PLC, saying:

I like my PLC because it allows me to work collaboratively with my colleagues.

Tyrene reported about what motivated her to participate in the PLC activities, citing the fact that her participation had improved her teaching:

By sharing experiences and ideas about what other teachers are doing in their school.

The sharing amongst teachers, as indicated in the above excerpts could be associated with collaboration, which is regarded as a key characteristic of an effective PLC. DuFour (2004) asserts that the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experiences and the improvement in learner performance, where teachers are participating in a PLC, can be attributed to that. In the case of this study, the teachers' participation in the PLC contributed to the improvement in the teachers' teaching and learners' reading skills.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented, discussed, analysed and interpreted the data using Kwakman's (2003) factors affecting teachers' participation in professional learning activities and Grossman's (1990) four domains of teacher knowledge. The findings suggest that the teachers' participation in the PLC activities contributed to teacher learning regarding the teaching of reading, which the participants reported led to the improvement in learners' reading skills.

In the following chapter, I present a summary of the key findings, recommendations and ideas for future research and conclude the chapter by providing concluding comments based on the key issues that emerged in the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented, discussed, analysed and interpreted the data generated to respond to the key research questions of the study. This chapter presents a consolidation of the key findings, and provides recommendations, limitations of the study and ideas for further research based on the findings of the study. The chapter concludes by providing concluding comments based on the key issues that emerged in the study.

5.2 Discussions of findings

The findings are discussed in line with the following key research questions of the study:

1. What is the nature of learning activities in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?
2. How does teacher learning occur in Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?
3. What kinds of teacher knowledge do Foundation Phase teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community?

5.2.1 What is the nature of teacher learning activities of the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?

The purpose of this section is to respond to Key Research Question 1, which sought to investigate the nature of teacher learning activities in Foundation Phase PLC. Using Kwakman's (2003) professional learning categories, the findings established that the learning activities that the Foundation Phase teachers embarked on in their PLC were observed as formal activities. These learning activities included learning from the facilitator, who was their Subject Advisor, outlining the steps involved in a Group Guided Reading (GGR) activity. The facilitator emphasised the importance of

grouping learners according to their abilities and the importance of individual reading. Teachers read an extract from a Grade 2 book while they were seated in groups, one teacher per group read an extract. The grouping of teachers according their abilities (as it is normally done in the FP classes) was not applied to the teachers but was emphasised to make teachers aware on how to group learners in their classrooms. The purpose of this learning activity was to teach how to teach word recognition, spelling, correct pronunciation and pace. The participants also participated in a shared reading activity in which they read an extract together. The focus of this activity was on reading aloud and language development. The other learning activity was learning through the modelling of the RESCI RAP poem. In this activity, teachers greeted the RESCI doll using different languages and made rhythms during their rehearsal of the RESCI RAP poem.

The above learning activities were planned before the workshop as the facilitator had prepared copies for the teachers for the reading activity. The process of teacher learning was illustrated by Fraser et al. (2005) whereby the literature referred to as Reid's four quadrants for teacher learning, where he pointed out that planned learning opportunities can take the form of formal and informal learning and incidental opportunities. Furthermore, Reid (2005) has explained that planned learning is often prearranged, whereas incidental learning is spontaneous and uncertain. For this study, the Foundation Phase PLC activities took the form of workshops, which were formally planned activities. The WhatsApp group took place outside the workshop and can be regarded as an unplanned activity. Moreover, the activities that took place in the Foundation Phase PLC support the existing literature on teacher learning, especially Reid (2005).

The formal workshops were planned by an external agent (to the PLC), in this case, referring to the Subject Advisor. The formal workshop was more associated with the training model which is one of the numerous CPD models as outlined by Kennedy (2005). In the workshop, a group of teachers is trained by experts to accomplish the outcome set by an expert. The purpose of the workshop is to transmit information about the curriculum. This was evident in the observation notes taken on the Foundation Phase workshops in which an expert, who was a Subject Advisor, lead the delivery of the training to the teachers, who were the participants of this study. The

literature asserts that a workshop is a type of CPD model, which could be productive and useful, especially when establishing new knowledge (Hoban, 2002). This was observed during the learning activity that took place in the Foundation Phase PLC that participated in this study. For instance, new content on the theme *WATERSMART* in Life Skills Learning Area was introduced to the participants. The Subject Advisor introduced this new content using a doll as a modelling tool. Teachers emphasised the fact that the workshops contributed to the improvement of the teaching of the content in their classrooms. The teachers, who were participants in this study, also reported that the reading activity helped to improve their teaching knowledge and skills, which, they argued, contributed to the improvement of their learners' reading skills. In a study conducted by Free and Olivier (2010) in the Eastern Cape province on the workshops that were held by the Department of Education, findings revealed that workshops can be a useful vehicle for supporting and equipping teachers with the necessary skills to teach specific content or topics.

However, the model of workshops has been criticised because of its once-off nature, without aftercare support for teachers. Kennedy (2005) and McConnell et al. (2013) argue that workshops place teachers as passive recipients of specific knowledge and do not accommodate their learning and teaching needs. Similarly, Opfer and Pedder (2011) contend that a “workshop is decontextualized from classroom practice with limited collaboration among teachers, rarely impact teacher learning occur or their teaching practice” (p. 754). While Opfer and Pedder (2011) claim that workshops offer teachers less opportunity for collaboration, which is one of the characteristics of the effective PLCs, the findings of this study suggest something contrary (that is, that is workshops may be a useful vehicle) to what Kennedy (2005), McConnell et al. (2013) and Opfer and Pedder (2011) have found against the use of workshop as a model for delivering professional development activities for teachers. The findings of this study revealed that teachers learnt through collaboration within a workshop context as a vehicle for delivering CPD activities. For example, teachers shared experiences within this context, which helped newly appointed teachers regarding how to effectively teach shared reading activities and work as a team to tackle specific activities, such as the translation of the RESCI RAP poem from English to isiZulu. This means that a context for collaboration among the teachers could be created within a workshop environment

as a medium for delivering CPD activities. Therefore, it could be argued that workshops allowed collaboration among teachers for this PLC.

Borko (2014) contend that teacher learning involves a brief conversation with peers after workshops. Teachers in the Foundation Phase PLC, who participated in this study, engaged in learning opportunities outside the scheduled PLC venue. The learning activities that took place outside the venue were the WhatsApp group, which was reported as the most relevant method for virtual PD for the selected PLC. The findings of this study showed that the WhatsApp group, as a medium for virtual PD, promoted collaboration, sharing, teamwork and trust among the members of the PLC. For instance, the teachers, who were members of this PLC and participated in this study, reported that they were not afraid to post questions on their WhatsApp group and that their peers responded to what they were posting about. This finding supports what Kearney et al. (2018) have highlighted that mobile learning allows communication with people both apart and within one's school or context. Moreover, mobile learning provides access to knowledge over different areas readily available in an online learning environment (Kearney et al., 2018). A study by Lapham and Lindemann-Komarova (2013) in Russia argued that teacher learning could happen outside the workshop. The findings of the study revealed that 77 per cent of teachers visited the Google site to download teaching materials for their lessons and 48 per cent of teachers used the Google platform to download educational materials (Lapham & Lindemann-Komarova, 2013). This study also revealed that the Google platform was the most popular site visited by teachers (Lapham & Lindemann-Komarova, 2013). Even though teachers in the study by Lapham and Lindemann-Komarova (2013) did not use the WhatsApp group, its findings suggest, as was the case in this study, that teachers may use alternative methods and platforms to continue learning when face-to-face platforms are no longer an option.

5.2.2 How does teacher learning occur in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?

Concerning Research Question 2, the findings of this study suggest that Foundation Phase teachers learned by reading, experimenting, demonstrating, reflecting and collaborating. These findings relate to Opfer & Pedder's (2011) argument, which

contends that the process of teacher learning can be influenced by the types of activities and the contexts in which they happen. The findings of this study revealed that the learning activities of the Foundation Phase PLC contributed to teacher professional development in that it equipped teachers with the skills of interpreting the curriculum and using different teaching strategies to ensure that their learners learned. The teachers in the PLC, who participated in this study, engaged in different learning activities that contributed to their professional learning in the workshops and WhatsApp group, including small talks (outside of the workshops). These findings support arguments about teacher learning activities (see, for instance, Kelly, 2006) who argued that teachers learning can take place as a result of a different range of activities. The findings of this study revealed that teachers learned through becoming learners themselves, reading an extract from a Grade 2 reader. Furthermore, teachers, who participated in this study, learned by modelling the RESCI RAP poem, in which they, for instance, rehearsed the poem by greeting the RESCI doll in various languages while dancing and pointing to the doll. These findings support Kelly's (2006) argument that teachers learn best when they are introduced to and involved in different learning opportunities and activities as part of teacher learning.

5.2.3 What kinds of teacher knowledge do Foundation Phase teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community?

Research Question 3 of this study sought to generate data to explore and understand the kinds of teacher knowledge teachers learned in their Foundation Phase PLC. Grossman (1990) has classified teacher knowledge into four categories, namely, subject content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of the context. The Foundation Phase teachers who participated in this study reported that, by participating in the PLC, they acquired different kinds of knowledge. This supports what, for example, Zulu and Bertram (2019) found in their study that teacher knowledge and collaboration activities that the teachers engaged in enable them to learn and develop. However, Zulu and Bertram (2019), as found in this study, reported that the role of an expert was important for facilitating deeper learning for teachers, especially where the knowledge of specialised content is required. In line with this finding, Zulu and Bertram (2019) have argued that “the teacher did need an expert” (p. 129). This was evident in the activities of this PLC

in Linda District in which the Subject Advisor led as the facilitator of teacher learning for the teachers in this PLC. For instance, the findings point to the fact that the teachers, who were participants in this study, developed subject matter knowledge during their participation in the workshop that focused on the teaching of reading in IsiZulu HL and English First Additional Language (FAL). For instance, the teachers reported that they developed reading skills, fluency, pace and comprehension, which they would apply in their teaching to ensure that their learners learned. It was also noted that the reading activity was learnt through individual and shared reading in which teachers participated as Foundation Phase learners. The findings of the study suggest that pedagogical content knowledge was the focus of this Foundation Phase PLC. This is supported by the data generated through the semi-structured interviews, which revealed that teachers learned different teaching strategies that they reported would assist them in the teaching of reading, specifically in IsiZulu HL. The teachers mentioned, for instance, the importance of visualisation and phonemic strategies for the effective teaching of reading. Drawing from Shulman's (1986) work, the founder of the domains of teacher knowledge, who advocated for pedagogical content knowledge as the most important domain of teacher knowledge, learning about the teaching of reading was important for the members of this Foundation Phase PLC, and this made them realise that "Reading utilizes several components of knowledge structures and processes that interact rapidly and simultaneously during reading" (Matjila & Pretorius, 2004, p. 4).

Concerning general pedagogic knowledge, the findings of this study suggest that this knowledge was learned through the activities that the teachers participated in. For example, the PLC Coordinator and other members reported that, as they were learning by modelling to draw learners' attention, they kept in mind the importance of creating a conducive learning space to allow activities to be effectively carried out. The findings on the knowledge of the context teachers revealed that the teachers understood their community and school context as it relates to teaching and learning. For instance, this was noted especially when the teachers mentioned that they had decided to use stones as counters instead of asking parents to buy counters. In addition to the knowledge of the context of their school and learners, the teachers were also aware that their learners had diverse learning needs and thus reported that they prepared their lessons such that they accommodated the individual learning needs of their learners.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The findings of the study revealed that the main focus in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community was on the teaching of reading particularly in IsiZulu HL. Even though four learning areas are offered in Foundation Phase, the PLC did not focus on all learning areas, namely, IsiZulu, English, Mathematics and Life Skills. Although the intention may have been to narrow the focus to increase learning opportunities, focusing on other learning areas as well, may have contributed to the notion of teaching language across the curriculum, as advocated for by the Department of Basic Education. In this regard, it may have to be considered that the reading activity includes reading in all the learning areas in the Foundation Phase. For example, in Mathematics, learners must read numbers so that can identify them correctly, which will potentially contribute to numeracy.
- The findings of this study revealed that the Subject Advisor and the PLC Coordinator dominated the proceedings in the workshops, and the contribution by teachers was minimal. This suggests that the PLC may have to consider rotating facilitation opportunities amongst all the members of the PLC. The Foundation Phase training manual (Department of Education, 2022) asserts that group members in the PLCs could take turns to play different roles, such as facilitation and coordination and that subject advisors must support teachers to build a highly effective PLC.
- The findings of the study also revealed that the time for the PLC also presented as a barrier for the teachers. Therefore, time should be considered so that the teachers may benefit maximally from the CPD activities of the PLC. If this happens, it will motivate the teachers to attend because their participation will not impact negatively their teaching responsibilities. This may suggest that the PLCs must meet when it is convenient for the teachers, which may be jointly agreed upon. That is, the teachers themselves must decide the frequency of the meetings of the PLC rather than their subject advisors. Moreover, the venue

for the PLC meetings and workshops must be in a central location or rotated among the schools that are part of the PLC to accommodate all the members. The regularity of meetings of PLCs has been discussed by different scholars (see, for instance, Stoll et al., 2006). The consideration of this recommendation is important as regularity contributes to the effective functioning of PLCs (Department of Basic Education, 2015).

- The findings of this study revealed that teacher learning in the Foundation Phase PLC also occurred off-site and continued after the face-to-face sessions had been finished, for example, through a WhatsApp group platform. These findings concur with the study by Aubusson et al. (2009) where they delineate among the different characteristics of mobile learning and point out that learning can take place “on the move, that occurs in a variety of places and times, and that capitalises on the ubiquitous nature of mobile technologies” (p. 234). This suggests that online or virtual learning is within the teachers’ context and reaches as a medium for CPD. Many research studies (see, for example, Bain, 2004; Staples et al., 2005) have investigated the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) into school curricula, the finding of this study revealed that the Foundation Phase teachers used technology for their learning rather than with their learners. It is, therefore, recommended that teachers must be encouraged to expand the use of ICT in their teaching to expand their efforts to accommodate the diverse learning needs of their learners.
- The findings of this study revealed that the members of the PLC were using the WhatsApp platform. Another recommended method of Online PLC is Telegram, which is a program created by Durov (2013), and which is an alternative to WhatsApp. Telegram is similar to WhatsApp because teachers also must join a group called Telegram for Teachers. Therefore, based on the finding of this study, it is recommended that the PLC Coordinator must be the only one who joins the Telegram group so that she can prevent the mixing of information among group members.

5.4 Limitation of this study

- Sampling: The study was conducted in Linda district particularly in lower Bushman Circuit which consist of 8 primary schools. Therefore, the sample size was limited to only one FP PLC and the findings cannot be generalisation to another context.
- Biasness: Biasness can mistakenly occur as the researcher is the member of the PLC and is familiar with the context. The researcher could influence the activities that teachers were participating so that it would benefited the interest and need of the research study.
- Limited literature on PLC for FP: It was noted that there were limited research studies of FP PLC in South Africa hence the recent research focus is abundance for secondary schools PLCs.

5.5 Ideas for further research

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are made regarding possibilities for further research:

- As suggested earlier, the findings of this study may not adequately represent realities in all school contexts, phases and PLCs. Therefore, there is a need to expand the current research theme to other schools, phases and PLCs to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of teacher learning in PLCs.
- This study has argued that teacher learning does not only happen on face-to-face platforms; it can also take place on virtual platforms, such as WhatsApp. Already, the case study of the PLC that was investigated in this study provides some examples of good practices regarding the operation of PLCs for teachers in South Africa. There is, therefore, a need to explore how the good practices identified in this study can be introduced and sold to other teachers in other contexts to provide options for improving teacher learning.

5.6 Conclusion

The study was conducted to explore the nature of teacher learning in a Foundation Phase PLC. That is, the study sought to understand how teacher learning occurred

within the context of a PLC and explore the types of knowledge acquired by teachers who participated in the selected PLC. This study established that Foundation Phase (Grade 1-3) teachers participating in the PLC learning activities learned by interacting with the facilitators of learning, sharing experiences with their colleagues and peers, learning by becoming learners themselves and through the use of modelling techniques. For this study, learning also took place outside workshops as mediums of CPD, through members using the WhatsApp group platform. The findings of this study thus revealed that subject matter knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and the knowledge of the context could be learned in the way the PLC organised and blended its activities.

There was extra prominence on the pedagogical content knowledge, which was evident in that that the PLC contributed to the enhancement of the skills of the teachers to teach reading. The findings impart a clear picture of the different teacher activities used to improve teacher learning in this study and the types of teacher knowledge teachers could acquire because they participated in the selected PLC. However, there were some challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers that hindered their participation in PLC. However, despite experiencing these challenges, the participants believed that their participation in the PLC was a good vehicle for addressing their professional development needs.

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Appendix 1: DBE Permission to conduct the study



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 3921063 / 033-3921051

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za
Buyi.ntuli@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Phindile Duma/Buyi Ntuli

Ref.:2/4/8/1719

Ms T Nyathi
4901 Ephangweni Mission Drycott
ESTCOURT
3310

Dear Ms Nyathi

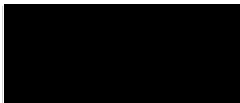
PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: “**AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHER LEARNING OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PLC)**”, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions have been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 25 March 2021 to 01 August 2023.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.

8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma/Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

UTHUKELA DISTRICT



Dr. EY Nzama
Head of Department: Education
Date: 31 March 2021

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix 2: Gatekeeper Permission Letter for Foundation Phase Subject Advisor

School of Education
College of Humanities
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Pietermaritzburg campus

Dear Sir or Madam

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

I am currently registered as a Master's student in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu- Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. As part of the requirement of this degree, I should conduct a research study. The title of the study is: *An exploration of teacher learning of Foundation Phase teachers in a Professional Learning Community.*

The study aims to describe the nature of learning activities in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community, to examine how the Foundation Phase teachers learn in a Professional Learning Community and also to describe the kinds of knowledge teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community. I therefore kindly request permission to interview and observe Foundation Phase teachers in the lower Ntabamhlophe circuit from August to October 2021.

Please be informed that I have requested permission to conduct this study from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education Head of Department. (Please refer to the letter attached). Teachers' participation is completely voluntary and they can freely withdraw from the study at any time without penalties. Please note that there will be no financial gains and or rewards for participating in the research study. Participants' identities and school names will not be used throughout the research study. Codes or pseudonyms will be used to ensure the participants' confidentiality and the information gathered will be treated with confidentiality and use for the research purpose.

For further information, feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr Bongiwe Zulu at 082 929 6838, Email: ZuluF1@ukzn.ac.za.

Research Office
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag x 54001, Durban, 4000, KwaZulu- Natal, South Africa
Tel: 031 2604557
Fax: 031 2604609

Appendix 3: Informed Consent for Participants

4901 Ephangweni Mission
Drycott, Esctcourt
3310
12 March 2021

Dear Sir/ Madam

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH PROJECT

My name is Thembisile Racheal Nyathi (Student Number: 20 006072) a Master of Education student in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu- Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus). As part of the requirement for this degree, I should conduct a research study. The title of the research study is: *An exploration of teacher learning in a Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community*. The purpose of the study is to examine the nature of learning activities in the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community and to describe the kinds of knowledge teachers learn by engaging in the selected Professional Learning Community. The research study is supervised by Doctor B. Zulu a lecturer at the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

You have been identified to participate in the interview session as a member of the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community. I kindly request to interview you. The interview should last for approximately an hour. I will record your views in writing and audio recorded. Follow-up interviews may be conducted if necessary. The data will be kept anonymous, it will not possible for it to be linked to your identity and Professional Learning Community. You will not be disadvantaged if you choose to participate or if you withdrew from the study.

Thank you
Yours faithfully,
TR Nyathi

My contact details are as follows:
Email address: thembisiletr87@gmail.com
Cell: 0721891924

My supervisor is Dr Bongwiwe Zulu a lecturer at UKZN in the School of Education, Pietermaritzburg Campus
Telephone: 033 260 5723
Email: ZuluF1@ukzn.ac.za

University of KwaZulu- Natal Research Office
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Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

DECLARATION FORM

I..... (full names of the participants)
hereby confirm that I understand the contents of the documents and the nature of the
research project, and I consent to participate in the research project.
I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I
desire to.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

.....

.....

Appendix 4: Interview schedule

TITLE: AN EXPLORATION OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS' LEARNING IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

1. What is your highest qualification?
2. How many years of teaching experience?
3. What is your current position?
4. How long have you been in the profession?

SECTION B: What is the nature of teacher learning activities in a Foundation Phase?

5. How often do you meet as a Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?
6. How many workshops and or meetings have you attended last year?
7. What learning activities did you do in the Professional Learning Community? Give examples.
8. Which of these activities did you find useful? Explain why?
9. What do you understand by the term "teacher learning"?
10. What factors motivate you to participate in Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?
11. What factors demotivates you participate in Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?

SECTION C: How does teacher learning occur in a Foundation Phase Professional Learning Community?

12. Elaborate on how teachers learn during learning activities in the Professional Learning Community.
13. Who determines what should be learnt in your Professional Learning Community?
14. Describe other learning experiences that you have experienced in your Professional Learning Community. Who pre-determined it? What was the focus? What were the resources that were used and provided to them?

SECTION D: What kinds of teacher knowledge do teachers learn by engaging in a selected PLC?

15. How often do you meet formally in the professional learning activities? Do you think that is enough? Elaborate
16. What kinds of teaching methods and strategies did you learn in the Foundation Phase PLC?
17. How would you describe the relationship between teachers in the PLC?

Thank you

Appendix 5: Certificate from the Editor

Ntwintwi

Proofreading and Editing Solutions

We Turn your Documents into a Work of Art!

Date: 26 February 2023

CERTIFICATE OF LANGUAGE EDITING

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that the thesis bearing the provisional title ***An Exploration of Foundation Phase Teachers' Learning in a Professional Learning Community***, to be submitted by **Thembisile Racheal Nyathi** has been edited for language correctness and spelling, consistency, coherence, and completeness of the list of references and cited authors, by Ntwintwi Proofreading and Editing Solutions. Neither the research content and substance nor the author's intentions were altered in any way during the editing process.

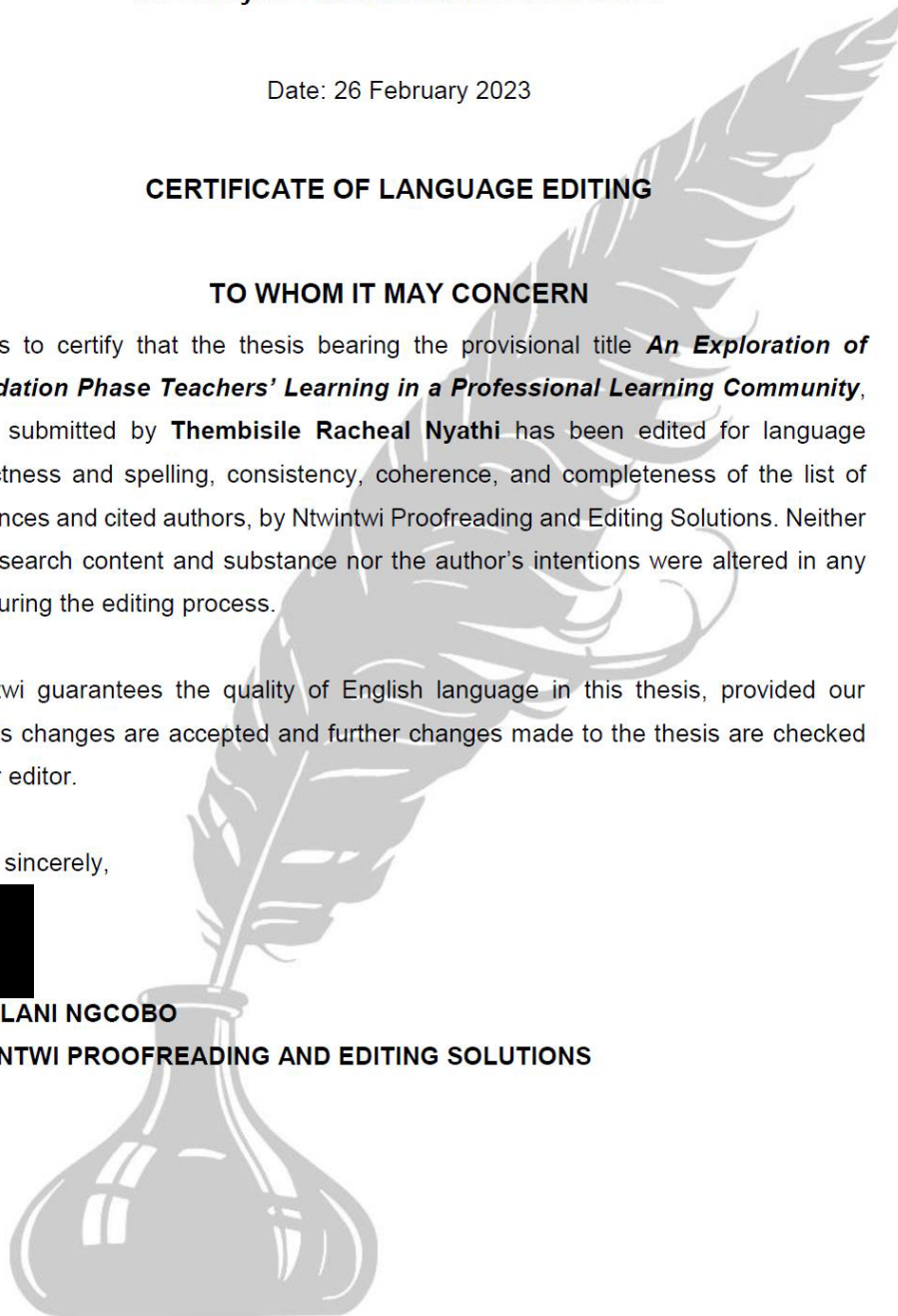
Ntwintwi guarantees the quality of English language in this thesis, provided our editor's changes are accepted and further changes made to the thesis are checked by our editor.

Yours sincerely,



JABULANI NGCOBO

NTWINTWI PROOFREADING AND EDITING SOLUTIONS



Appendix 6: Turnitin Report

Feedback Studio - Google Chrome
ev.turnitin.com/app/carta/en_us/?o=2004720905&s=3&u=1075701536&lang=en_us

feedback studio Thembisile Nyathi Thesis (2February 2023) /null

Match Overview

14%

Rank	Source	Match Percentage
3	Peter Kelly, what is te... Publication	1%
4	Karin Brodie, Teacher ... Publication	1%
5	"Schooling for Sustaina... Publication	1%
6	"Examining Pedagogic... Publication	<1%
7	Jennifer B. Chauvot, "G... Publication	<1%
8	Matseliso L. Mokhele, "... Publication	<1%
9	Anna Kristin Sigurðard... Publication	<1%

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