

| RESEARCH ARTICLE**Professional Learning Communities: a Catalyst for Teacher Learning in Moroccan Educational Reforms****Lahcen Tighoula***Researcher, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Department of English, Beni Mellal Morocco***Corresponding Author:** Lahcen Tighoula, E-mail: Tighoula.Lahcen.phd@usms.ac.ma**| ABSTRACT**

This article critically examines current educational reform initiatives in Morocco, particularly the "Integrated School Project" (ISP) and the "Pioneering Schools" (PS) initiative, through the lens of teacher learning. It reflects a global shift from the traditional notion of "professional development" to a more nuanced understanding of "professional learning," where educators are positioned not merely as recipients of training but as active agents in their professional growth. Drawing on theoretical foundations such as sociocultural learning and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), the article posits Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a transformative framework that supports sustainable, context-sensitive teacher learning. A comparative analysis with Singapore's successful PLC model provides valuable insights into structuring localized, teacher-driven communities that enhance agency, collaboration, and innovation. While Morocco's reform projects signify a commendable step forward, their effectiveness is limited by a predominantly top-down implementation approach. The article argues that embedding PLCs within these initiatives can foster a more adaptive, ethically grounded, and future-ready teacher education system.

| KEYWORDS

Teacher Learning, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Educational Reform, Professional Development, Education Policy.

| ARTICLE DOI:**1. Introduction**

Across the globe, educational reform is increasingly seen as dependent on the quality of teachers and their capacity for continuous learning. The 21st-century classroom presents unprecedented challenges: student diversity, quick technological advances, and evolving societal demands. In this complex educational landscape, the professional

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learning of teachers has been regarded as a critical lever for reform. Teachers are no longer viewed as passive implementers of policy but as knowledge workers who must engage in on-going learning to refine their practice and respond effectively to student needs. The Moroccan ministry of education has led significant reforms to improve educational quality. This article aims to analyse these reforms from the lens of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a model for teacher education reform.

2. Literature Review

2.1. From "Professional Development" to "Professional Learning": A Paradigm Shift

The shift from "professional development" to "professional learning" represents more than a change in terminology. It reflects a fundamental rethinking of how educators grow professionally. Easton (2008) articulates this shift succinctly: "Developing is not enough; educators must become learners". Traditional models of professional development, often characterized by one-off workshops or expert-led training, fall short in equipping teachers to navigate dynamic educational environments. In contrast, professional learning emphasizes sustained, collaborative, and contextually grounded experiences. Burns and Richards (2009) describe teacher learning as a form of socialization into the professional thinking and practices of a professional communities. This perspective moves beyond transactional training towards a model where teachers co-construct knowledge and practices through interaction, reflection, and inquiry.

2.2. Context of Moroccan Educational Reforms

In recent years, Morocco has embarked on a series of ambitious educational reforms designed to transform its schooling system and address long-standing challenges related to teaching quality and student achievement. These reforms are part of a broader national vision articulated in the Strategic Vision for Education 2015–2030 (*Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique*, 2015), which seeks to align education with the country's socio-economic development goals and global educational standards. Central to the implementation of this vision are two flagship initiatives: the Integrated School Project (ISP) and the Pioneering Schools (PS) initiative, each grounded in specific ministerial directives. The ISP, formalized through Ministerial Circular No. 014/24, adopts a whole-school approach to improvement, encouraging schools to develop contextualized action plans with a focus on pedagogical practices, collaborative leadership, and professional development. It seeks to strengthen institutional accountability while building teacher capacity through structured training programs and school-based coaching. Similarly, the PS initiative, introduced under Ministerial Circular No. 022/23, aims to foster innovation by establishing model schools that pilot advanced pedagogical strategies—including learner-centered instruction, Teaching at the Right Level (TARL), and inclusive education. These pioneering schools are tasked with generating best practices that can be shared and adapted across other institutions in the system. While both

projects reflect a forward-looking vision and considerable institutional investment, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how they conceptualize and support teacher learning. Teachers are the primary agents in enacting these reforms, and without their meaningful engagement and professional empowerment, policy implementation risks remaining inconsistent or symbolic. Embedding teacher learning as a core, ongoing process—rather than as sporadic training—will be key to achieving the systemic transformation these initiatives aspire to bring about.

2.3. The Role of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

This article introduces Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a conceptual and practical framework aligned with contemporary understandings of effective teacher learning. PLCs provide the structures and cultures necessary for teachers to engage in sustained collaboration, reflective inquiry, and collective problem-solving.

2.4. Defining Teacher Learning: Beyond the "Training Food Chain"

Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008) propose three categories of teacher learning :

- Knowledge for Practice, which involves acquiring content and pedagogical knowledge through workshops or formal instruction;
- Knowledge in Practice, which develops knowledge through experience, reflection, and peer collaboration ; and
- Knowledge of Practice, which involves engaging in systematic inquiry to inform and transform practice, often through action research. Traditional professional development often prioritizes the first type, "training for immediate needs". However, effective teacher learning must integrate all three, recognizing that practitioners need to test strategies in real contexts and engage in deeper learning through collaborative inquiry.

2.5. The Sociocultural Perspective on Teacher Learning

According to Burns and Richards (2009), effective teacher learning is socially constructed. Teachers acquire "practitioner knowledge" through participation in professional communities where shared practices and beliefs are negotiated. This aligns with the sociocultural turn in teacher education, which values context, collaboration, and experiential knowledge.

2.6. Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning

- Drawing from Hawley and Valli (1999) and Hunzicker (2010), effective professional learning should:
- Focus on improving student outcomes.

- Be embedded in teachers' daily work.
- Encourage collaboration and active learning.
- Be continuous and supported by resources.
- Address teacher motivation and local needs.
- Be underpinned by theory and aligned with systemic change.

2.7. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a Framework

Wenger (1998) defines Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as groups sharing a concern or passion, deepening their knowledge through ongoing interaction. PLCs operationalize this idea in schools by fostering shared leadership, collective inquiry, and mutual accountability. Research supports the value of PLCs in enhancing teacher learning (Avalos, 2011; Vangrieken et al., 2017). They embody Villegas-Reimers' (2003) principles of continuous, collaborative, and context-responsive professional development. Additionally, PLCs promote distributed leadership and a strategic orientation toward educational transformation (Senge, 1990; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

3. Methodology

This article uses a qualitative, critical analysis approach to examine how Moroccan educational reforms conceptualize and support teacher learning. The methodology involves a two-part process. First, it analyzes key policy documents, including Ministerial Circulars No. 014/24 (Integrated School Project) and No. 022/23 (Pioneering Schools initiative), to identify their explicit and implicit strategies for teacher professional development. This step aims to understand the frameworks and implementation models proposed by the Ministry of Education.

Second, the article provides a comparative analysis by contrasting the Moroccan reform initiatives with the established principles of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as articulated in scholarly literature. This includes drawing on a well-documented case study of the Singaporean PLC model to extract transferable lessons and best practices. The article's core argument is built on a synthesis of these sources, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the current Moroccan approach and arguing for the integration of a PLC framework to create more sustainable and teacher-driven professional learning. The findings and discussion are based on a synthesis of these reviewed documents, not on primary data collection.

3.1. Research Questions

The article seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1) How do current Moroccan educational reform projects conceptualize and support teacher learning?

RQ2) To what extent do these projects align with the principles of effective teacher learning and PLCs?

RQ3) What lessons can Morocco draw from international PLC models, particularly Singapore?

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Integrated School Project (ISP)

The Integrated School Project (ISP), guided by Ministerial Circular 014/24, represents a strategic approach to school improvement and teacher capacity building. Its implementation involves preparation and submission to provincial directorates, with evaluation centered around key axes—particularly Axis 2, which targets teaching materials and continuous teacher training. The project includes four types of training: alignment with national strategy, specialization-based development, ICT-focused modules, and practical coaching through provincial training teams. While commendable in structure, several limitations emerge:

4.1.1. Implementation and Sustainability: Inconsistent execution across regions and a lack of sustained funding create disparities and undermine long-term impact. In addition, although the coaching model is promising, more emphasis is needed on giving teachers time and space to experiment and receive contextualized feedback.

4.1.2. Pedagogical Scope: The training content should expand beyond ICT to encompass differentiated instruction, inclusion, and inquiry-based approaches. A major oversight is the limited role teachers play in identifying their learning needs or contributing to program design—resulting in possible misalignment with real classroom challenges.

4.2. The Pioneering Schools (PS) Initiative: The PS initiative, launched under Circular 022/23, is an expansive reform aiming to spread pedagogical innovation from pilot schools to the wider system. Now extending to middle schools, its third axis focuses on coaching teachers and enhancing pedagogical practices. Teachers are provided with resource-rich packages, including lesson guides and tools tailored to Teaching at the Right Level (TARL). The initiative also promotes effective teaching techniques to address learning disparities. Despite its potential, its success hinges on a bottom-up orientation : The usefulness of pedagogical packages depends on teacher involvement in adapting and contextualizing them. Training effectiveness improves when teachers help plan sessions, express their needs, and collaborate with peers. The TARL approach illustrates that empowering teachers with flexibility and support yields positive outcomes.

4.3. Overarching Critique and Opportunities for Integration with PLCs

While both ISP and PS highlight coaching and training, they often underplay teacher autonomy and collaboration. These gaps reflect a broader tendency toward top-down planning. As Kennedy (2024) argues, reforming teacher education is challenging due to rigid governance structures. However, PLCs can create "spaces of opportunity"—localized, progressive, and ethically grounded environments that allow teachers to grow and innovate. Embedding PLCs into reform initiatives would:

- Enhance contextual responsiveness;
- Build sustained collaboration;
- Promote teacher agency and leadership.

4.4. Learning from International Experiences: The Singaporean PLC Model

Singapore's education system is widely admired for its structured, strategic embrace of teacher professional learning. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has prioritized PLCs as a cornerstone of teacher quality and professionalism. Beginning in 2009, Singapore initiated a phased rollout across public schools, culminating in sustained learning networks by 2018. Singapore's PLCs are structured into Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and operate through three guiding elements : Three Big Ideas: Ensuring student learning, building a collaborative culture, and focusing on results. Four Critical Questions: What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they've learned it? How will we respond if they haven't? How will we extend learning for those who excel? Five Dimensions of Effective PLCs: Shared leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Moroccan education decision makers can draw several lessons:

- Introduce structured PLCs with clear objectives and reflective protocols;
- Pilot PLC implementation in selected schools and conduct iterative evaluations;
- Foster a culture of collaboration and collective problem-solving.

Singapore demonstrates that with strategic support and leadership commitment, PLCs can become embedded in school cultures, driving both teacher excellence and student achievement.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Key Arguments

Effective reform depends on shifting from traditional professional development to professional learning. Morocco's ISP and PS initiatives mark important progress but fall short in empowering teachers to identify and address their

needs. PLCs offer a proven, scalable framework to bridge top-down policies and grassroots realities. They support collaboration, inquiry, and shared responsibility for student outcomes.

5.2. Implications for Policy and Practice

In considering the path forward, Moroccan policymakers could build upon the strengths of the current reform frameworks by promoting teacher-driven Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). This approach would enable a shift towards localized, reflective professional learning, empowering educators to collaboratively address the unique challenges of their specific contexts rather than relying solely on a top-down, standardized model. To ensure the success of this transition, it is crucial that the initiatives are supported by long-term resource allocation and consistent administrative backing. This includes providing dedicated time for collaborative sessions, funding for necessary materials, and fostering a school culture where such grassroots initiatives are valued and encouraged by leadership at all levels. By doing so, policymakers can ensure that reforms are not merely implemented but are genuinely embedded within the daily practice of teaching.

5.3. Future Research Directions

To further refine and substantiate these policy recommendations, several avenues for future research should be pursued. First, empirical studies are needed to investigate the implementation of PLCs within Moroccan contexts, moving beyond policy analysis to understand the on-the-ground realities of their formation, function, and impact. Second, a key area for exploration is to understand teacher perceptions of autonomy and collaboration within the current and future reform initiatives, capturing the educator's voice to determine whether these programs are truly empowering them or simply adding to their workload. Finally, comparative research could be highly beneficial, exploring the outcomes of top-down versus bottom-up professional development models across similar educational systems. This would provide valuable data to inform policy decisions and demonstrate the long-term benefits of a more collaborative and teacher-centric approach to educational reform in Morocco.

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ORCID iD: 0009-0009-9628-7053

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