‘To Win a War, You Need to Train Your Army First’: An Exploration of Teacher Development in South Africa

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Abstract

Teachers are critical to reforming the South African educational system and enhancing learners’ academic outcomes. However, current teacher development strategies face challenges such as poor implementation, lack of contextual relevance, and failure to meet educators’ needs. The Integrated Strategic Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED) represents a positive shift, promoting Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as the future of teacher development. Based on social learning theories, PLCs encourage ongoing, collaborative learning, offering an alternative to the one-time seminars that have proven ineffective in South Africa. This study investigates existing teacher development methods and explores the potential of PLCs to foster long-term, contextually appropriate growth. It evaluates the effectiveness of PLCs in enhancing teacher performance through a comprehensive systematic literature review.

Keywords: Teacher Development, Professional Learning Committees, South African Teachers, Social Learning Theories

Introduction/Background

Teachers today encounter a myriad of complex challenges, including the need to work effectively with multilingual learners, address low literacy rates, manage overcrowded classrooms, and adapt to diverse learning needs (Du Plessis et al.,2020; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Spaull, 2013). In South Africa, these challenges are compounded by resource constraints and disparities within the education system, particularly in historically disadvantaged schools (Bantwini & King-McKenzie, 2011; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Teacher development is a critical means of equipping educators with the skills and knowledge to navigate these obstacles, fostering improved teaching practices and enhancing overall learner outcomes (Geldenhuys & Oosthuizen, 2015; Jita & Mokhele, 2014).

Teacher development, as a form of professional development, is specifically designed to support teachers’ ongoing learning and foster their professional growth (Jovanova-Mitkovska, 2010; Xaso et al., 2017). Through this process, teachers adopt new beliefs, explore innovative classroom practices, and refine their teaching strategies (Evans, 2002; Sims, 2021). Such development is essential for enhancing school effectiveness, as it improves teaching practices, enriches learner experiences, and contributes positively to overall school performance (Gnawali, 2008; Singh & Mukeredzi, 2024).

In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid education has left lasting challenges that hinder a culture of robust professional development. Post-democratic reforms have introduced various approaches to teacher

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development to address these issues. In 2003, the Department of Basic Education introduced the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), followed by the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (NPFTED) in 2006. This framework includes Initial Professional Education of Teachers (IPET) and Continuing Professional Development for Teachers (CPDT). These policies aim to equip teachers with essential skills and tools to excel in their roles and support ongoing professional competence and performance through structured development programs (NPFTED, 2006). However, many of these initiatives have seen limited success in effectively advancing teacher development (Jita & Ndlalane, 2009; Tapala, 2024).

This study adopts a twofold approach: firstly, it examines the policies that currently drive teacher development in South Africa; secondly, it explores the potential of PLCs as emerging, sustainable drivers of teacher development in the future.

Statement of Problem

The South African education system faces a twofold responsibility: establishing an equitable educational environment and keeping pace with the evolving demands of a globalized world (Pretorius, 2008). As central agents of educational change, teachers play a critical role in realizing these goals. Effective teacher development is essential—to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills and improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools, directly contributing to student outcomes and overall school effectiveness (Gnawali, 2008; Singh & Mukeredzi, 2024).

Historically, teacher development programs in South Africa were limited to one-off, generic workshops that lacked alignment with teachers' individual learning needs and offered little ongoing support (De Clercq & Phiri, 2013). These shortcomings have left teachers underprepared to meet contemporary challenges such as teaching multilingual learners and addressing low literacy rates. Although recent initiatives have introduced new frameworks to address these gaps, many development efforts have yet to yield substantial changes in classroom practice (Bertram, 2011).

Given these ongoing challenges, this study aims to examine the current framework for teacher development in South Africa and explore innovative, contextually appropriate approaches that can sustain teacher growth. Specifically, this study will use a systematic literature review to evaluate the use of PLCs as potential drivers of effective, long-term teacher development.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology under the interpretivist paradigm, which is suitable for interpreting complex phenomena such as teacher development through the lens of context and experience (Creswell, 2013). This study used a systematic literature review as its' methodological approach. A systematic review of literature seeks to identify, evaluate, and interpret available research that is relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Mutula, 2015). This process involves searching for and selecting relevant studies, evaluating their quality, and connecting their findings to address research questions outlined in the study (Liberati et al., 2009).

Data for the literature review will be acquired from scholarly articles, policy documents, and grey literature, such as government reports and publications from relevant educational organizations. This ensures that both peer-reviewed research and important policy documents are incorporated into the analysis.

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The findings will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, a prominent qualitative research method for detecting, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This technique will allow for identifying important challenges, obstacles, and trends in South African teacher development programs, as well as evaluating PLCs' potential to drive future growth.

The research will focus on answering the following questions:

1. What are the current practices and strategies for teacher development in South Africa?
2. To what extent can PLCs effectively drive and support future teacher development initiatives in South Africa?

Literature Review

Initial Professional Educational Training (IPET)

In South Africa, teacher development starts at the IPET phase. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is responsible for this initial phase of teacher development. According to Deacon (2012), IPET is a process whereby future teachers are selected and trained to begin teaching at schools. The formal period of IPET begins when a student enrols in a teacher education program. Depending on the course selected in the teacher educational program, future teachers are equipped with curriculum knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge, and professional knowledge through teacher induction programs.

IPET programs set the foundation for the quality of teachers produced. Sharma, Phillion, and Malewski (2011) argue that IPET programs provided by teacher educational programs provide future teachers with only the basic knowledge of teaching. Flórez and Bastos (2017) state that the way future teachers experience teacher development at the initial stages of their careers determines the pace at which teachers progress from a novice teacher to an expert teacher. This form of pre-service training is not enough to provide future teachers with a smooth transition into their teaching career, as all schools differ in context and culture. However, it is important to highlight that while IPET programs allow future teachers to familiarize themselves with and prepare themselves for future work environments, it does not cater to the varied contexts in which schools exist.

A technical report released by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and DHET in 2011 concurred with this view, indicating that *'capacity, quality, cooperation, relevance, and reach of all initial teacher education programmes'* (p. 15) need to be improved. Furthermore, the report found that there was a lack of amalgamation between initial and continued education teacher development; some initial teacher education programs offered by institutions were weak and focused too much on theoretical content; IPET programs offered by universities had limited focus on school-based practices; and that only a few initial teacher education programs have been created to move beyond skills training to develop competences and reflective practices.

The failing IPET programs highlight the need for further emphasis to be placed on continuous professional teacher development. This is appropriate as learning is a continuous process and should not be limited at IPET.

Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD)

The CPTD system has been designed to equip teachers with competencies to face the ever-changing challenges and demands of the 21st-century South African education system (Nhlumayo & Chikoko, 2022; Steyn, 2008).

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Teachers are encouraged through the CPTD system to take responsibility for their self–development by identifying their needs using the Quality Management System (QMS). The CPTD system is made available to all South African teachers. However, it is only compulsory for teachers in the public sector to participate in the CPTD system.

The framework provided by the South African Council for Educators (SACE) identifies three types of CPTD activities:

Teacher-initiated activities (Type 1) **-** These activities are self-chosen. Teachers are required to identify their own developmental needs and engage in self-development activities, thus taking responsibility for their professional growth. These activities include reading journal articles, books, newspapers, magazines, etc. (SACE, 2008).

School-initiated activities (Type 2) - These are activities that the school leads. It is used to address the common needs of teachers, as identified by the School Management Team (SMT) or a group of teachers. Examples of activities include attending a workshop, attending staff meetings, etc. This type of teacher development activity encourages collaboration among teachers, inspiring them to work in unison to respond to the needs of the school (SACE, 2008).

Externally initiated (Type 3) - This is employer-initiated, offered by the Department of Education, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), etc. Private providers such as universities, NGOs, and others also fall under this category. These activities are subjected to SACEs' evaluation processes. It includes full qualifications, short courses, and skills programs. This type of program/activity is six days or longer (SACE, 2008).

What is QMS?

QMS, previously known as IQMS, is a performance management system that consists of three instruments: Developmental Appraisal (DA), Performance Measurement (PM), and Whole School Evaluation (WSE). Each element of the QMS serves a different purpose.

The DA is a tool that must be used transparently to ascertain areas of strengths and weaknesses held by the teacher. This is then used to design programs for individual development. PM is a tool used to evaluate teachers for salary progression. This is used as an incentive for teachers to continue their professional development. WSE is a tool that is used to scrutinize the effectiveness of the school; SMT/district officials use the findings from the WSE to design school improvement plans (Steyn & Van Niekerk, 2018; Republic of South Africa, 2001).

The QMS has been designed with the goal of preparing a conducive environment for teacher development. This performance management system is used to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the school and the performance of the teacher, to identify the precise needs of teachers to support and develop their professional competencies, and to promote accountability (Nhlumayo & Chikoko, 2022; Tlhakanelo, 2014).

QMS and its Relation to CPTD

The QMS and CPTD systems are designed to work in conjunction with one another. The QMS appraises individual teachers who intend to identify their areas of strength and weakness in order to design programs

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for their individual development. The CPTD system gives teachers a list of providers who are SACE-certified and a list of professional development programs/activities which are SACE-endorsed. These programs/activities can be used to tackle the needs of the individual teacher, which were identified during the QMS process.

Teachers mostly use teacher-initiated teacher development programs/activities to tackle their needs in their professional growth plan. SMTs largely use the school-initiated professional development programs/activities to tackle the growing and ever-changing needs stated in the school improvement plan. District and provincial officials typically use the SACE externally initiated professional development activities to tackle the needs identified and stated in the district/province improvement plan (Mofolo & Mosala, 2019).

Challenges Faced Using the QMS and CPTD System

While the relationship between QMS and CPTD sounds great in theory, research by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) in 2015 indicated that this system is not successfully implemented throughout all South African schools. Principals and teachers were not successfully workshopped on how to implement the QMS in their schools, leading to the non-implementation/poor implementation of the QMS. In addition, reviews of the QMS indicated that the professional development part of the QMS has been mostly ignored, largely because schools do not have the resources or time necessary to address professional development issues (CDE, 2015).

Bernadine (2019) highlights that poor participation in CPTD systems at the school level is largely because most teachers do not have access to computers and resources, and CPTD is an electronic-driven system. Furthermore, the CPTD system does not offer any monetary benefit to teachers like the QMS; therefore, teachers do not value it.

According to CDE (2015), teachers indicated that neither the SMT nor departmental officials support and monitor CPTD taking place in schools. Therefore, the system does not provide the professional development needed to improve teacher effectiveness, as identified by international research (Zindi & Sibanda, 2023).

The State of Teacher Development in South Africa

Teacher development in South Africa is regarded as a fundamentally important aspect of teacher education and embodies principles as laid down by democracy while prioritizing stakeholder involvement (Christiansen & Bertram, 2015; Maistry, 2008).

According to a report released by the Southern African Review of Education (SARE) in 2008, teacher development in South Africa has been sporadic and poorly coordinated. Ono and Ferriera (2010) note that this is the case in many developing countries, largely due to budget constraints and the heavy emphasis placed on IPET.

Bertram (2011) asserts that current teacher development initiatives have not been successful in improving the quality of South African education. In addition, Maistry (2008) draws attention to the policy-practice gap in teacher education by indicating that the vision for CPTD in South Africa is only clear in policy, and while this vision for CPTD looks good on paper, it is not being actualized in teacher education. In reality, teachers have limited access to quality Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. The

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current system in place is not sufficient to attain the enhancements needed to produce quality teaching and learning in schools. CPD programs/activities are still largely conducted through isolated and once-off training initiatives. Furthermore, these initiatives lack coherent strategies, monitoring, and follow-ups (DBE, 2015).

The Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED) was developed in 2011 to improve teacher development in South Africa. The goal was to improve the teacher development initiatives by re-envisioning current teacher development practices to suit the needs and improve the quality of South African teachers.

SARE (2008) noted that collaboration among teachers in learning communities was beginning to emerge as a strategic response to overcome the professional development challenges faced by teachers and that the use of PLCs was beginning to take root in South Africa. In support, the DBE released guideline PLCs in 2015 as an instrument for teacher development. The DBE advocated for the use of PLCs as a teacher development instrument, stating that it is more relevant and effective for teacher development in the changing context of South African education.

What are PLCs?

Schools are continuously subjected to new educational changes. Principals must ensure that their staff is equipped with tools to cope with new changes. This requires ongoing professional development (Rayiramkandath, 2017).

Organizational learning programs such as PLCs provide principals and teachers with a platform to share knowledge, learn, and grow as teachers. The ISPFTED (2011) states that "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 developmental trajectories and to set up activities that will drive their development." (p.14)

According to Hord (1997) PLCs are characterized by five elements:

3. Shared and supportive leadership, whereby teachers and management work in collaboration to make decisions.
4. Shared vision and values are centered around how learners learn.
5. Collective learning, whereby teachers work together with one another and learn from each other daily and apply newly learned skills.
6. Supportive conditions are necessary as school culture plays a significant part in how PLCs are conducted.
7. Shared personal practices, whereby teachers share their personal experiences and discuss what works and what does not.

PLCs are based on the culture of learning. Whereby teachers learn, for their learners and themselves. They are driven by knowledge and research. PLCs provide a platform for teachers to share new ideas and get critical feedback and multiple perspectives on a wide range of matters. (Jita & Mokhele, 2014; Lee & Louis, 2019).

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Teachers can add to research through introspection and reflection on their own teaching and learning practices. This research can be conducted in their classrooms; for example, teachers can examine the effectiveness of different pedagogies in their classrooms. (DBE, 2015).

Theories Embedded in PLCs

Social learning theories are grounded in the foundation of PLCs, in particular, Wenger's social learning theory and Vygotsky's social development theory.

Wenger's Social Learning Theory

Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning states that learning is a form of social and active participation. For knowledge to be successfully grasped and practised, participants must be active during the knowledge-sharing sessions and work together to create and implement practices that work in a particular context.

According to Wenger (2007), Communities of Practice (COP) are created when individuals participate in the process of collective learning in a particular learning area. Steyn (2008) states that learning is a significant part of people's participation in COP and their environment. In addition, Steyn (2008) argues that COPs are a prerequisite for learning and are also at the centre of making people capable of meaningful learning.

Nguyen et al. (2024) state that teacher development programs that are created for groups of teachers within the same school have numerous developmental advantages. Members within the community are familiar enough with one another; hence, they can cooperate efficiently and effectively with one another. Furthermore, they are able to recognize people who may need assistance (Steyn, 2013). Moreover, teachers can use this platform to share school and community-bound experiences, skills, and issues faced during the program; it also promotes the schools' mission and significantly impacts teachers' practice (Lee, 2005).

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

According to Sweigart (2012), Vygotsky's social development theory provides the base for collaborative learning, professional learning communities, collective efficacy, and the achievement of improved academic outcomes.

Vygotsky's social development theory is based on the assumption that as members interact with their colleagues, they begin to internalize new information and new ways of thinking and learn problem-solving strategies that can be utilized in their environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Sweigart, 2012; Hudson, 2015).

Vygotsky's theory implies that when learning takes place through social interactions, knowledge is acquired over time by collaborating with others (Husdon, 2015). He believed that both children and adults can advance their intellectual capabilities more proficiently through interaction with their colleagues (Vygotsky, 1978).

In line with the theory, Hudson (2015) states that PLCs allow teachers to collaborate with their colleagues, and through this collaboration, they enhance their learning and grow professionally. Furthermore, by sharing their experiences and skills, they also guided the learning of their colleagues.

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Benefits and Challenges of Implementing PLCs

According to the DBE (2015), PLCs have one main goal: improving teacher practices and ultimately improving learner outcomes. PLCs provide teachers with the opportunity to gain experience through the introduction of new practices and the generation of new knowledge (Harris & Jones, 2010). It also helps in bridging the gap between educational theories, policies, and practice.

PLCs create a space whereby teachers can address issues by connecting pedagogical practice with subject content knowledge. In addition, PLCs can be used as a platform for teachers to share their ideas with senior teachers, whereby junior teachers get mentored by more experienced teachers. This, in turn, prompts teachers to evaluate and assess their current practices rather than use outdated ideas (DBE, 2015; Hudson, 2015).

PLCs allow teachers "to customize and personalize their professional development, and they can develop a sense of ownership through self-directed learning" (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012, p. 20). Erlangsen (2018) asserts that when a teacher feels as if they are supported in their own learning and teaching practices, they are more devoted towards learning and more successful in their practice than those teachers who do not feel as if they are supported. Furthermore, Hellner (2008) notes that teachers experience positive outcomes from successful PLCs, such as improved job satisfaction, morale, learners' academic outcomes, and decreased absenteeism rate.

A study by Jita and Mokhele (2014), which explored cluster-based PLCs in the South African context, highlighted the positive impact of collaborative learning on teachers' confidence and practices. One teacher remarked, *"You see, coming together helped us a great deal; it was good to share ideas because we are all not the same. Some have knowledge on what others do not have. I really enjoyed them, because as I said, in a circuit, teachers come together and prepare together what we were going to do in school* (Jita & Mokhele, 2014, p. 10*).* Similarly, an earlier study by Zwane (2012) corroborated this study, underscoring the value of PLCs in fostering professional growth. One teacher noted the benefits of participating in a PLC: "*The committees provided a platform for teachers to discuss teaching strategies, new curriculum changes, subject content problems and learners' performance"* (Zwane, 2012, p. 49). These findings demonstrate how PLCs encourage collective problem-solving, leading to improvements in teaching practices and learner outcomes.

Despite the notable success of PLC implementation, systemic barriers continue to hinder the effectiveness of PLCs. Research by De Clercq and Phiri (2013) identified factors such as time constraints and a lack of leadership support as major obstacles to successful PLC implementation. Similarly, a case study conducted by Zulu and Mukeredzi (2021) in South African schools highlights the limitations of department-initiated PLCs, noting that departmental officials rather than teachers often steer them. This top-down approach restricts teacher autonomy and hampers genuine collaboration between teachers. Furthermore, department-led PLC meetings often consist of a large group of teachers and are held irregularly, further undermining the effectiveness of PLCs.

To address barriers to effective PLC implementation, it is recommended that principals receive training on supporting PLCs as part of their role as school leaders (Department of Basic Education, 2019). Practical support from principals is crucial and should include adapting teachers' timetables, providing a dedicated space for PLC meetings, and ensuring that teachers have access to the necessary resources. Additionally, school leaders should actively encourage and motivate teachers to participate in PLCs, fostering a collaborative environment that supports professional growth and improved teaching practices (Department of Basic Education, 2019). To mitigate the challenges associated with department-led PLC meetings, *Professional*

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Learning Communities: A Guideline for South African Schools (2015) proposes the formation of school-based PLCs. This approach reduces transport costs and organizational challenges for participating members while providing an effective platform to exchange knowledge and resources.

Findings

Teacher Development in South Africa

The onset of teacher development takes place through IPET programs. Once future teachers conclude the IPET program, they will continue their professional development through CPTD programs/activities.

The Onset of Teacher Education

Successful IPET programs have many benefits. Effective IPET programs can reduce the cost of lucrative long-term teacher development initiatives by providing future teachers with the skills needed to face the ever-changing educational system. In addition, these programs can assist future teachers in bridging the gap from a student to a teacher (Deacon, 2012; Dillard, 2016).

The technical report released by the DBE in 2011 highlighted the sad reality of South African IPET programs. The report indicated that current IPET programs are failing future teachers, emphasizing the need for a drastic change in current IPET programs, as IPET programs do not equip future teachers with the tools needed to teach in an imbalanced educational system. This is one of the many reasons young, skilled teachers are leaving South African education in search of greener pastures.

Policy Framework of CPTD

Times are constantly changing, and these changes force modifications in education. To stay abreast of these changes, teachers should engage in CPTD.

CPTD programs should be aimed at providing teachers with subject and pedagogical competencies to guide them in implementing updated and context-suited teaching practices that enhance learner outcomes. It is important to recognize that learning is a dynamic, life-long process (Kimmerle et al., 2015). Therefore, teacher education should go beyond IPET. In accordance with this statement, the DBE created the QMS policy, which was released in 2003, and, in partnership with SACE, created the NPFTED in 2007. However, these well-formulated policies were highly flawed in their implementation.

Firstly, with regards to the implementation of CPTD programs, as highlighted in the NPFTED, teachers and SMT did not receive adequate training or support from the DBE to guide them in the successful implementation of CPTD programs. Secondly, this policy does not affect teachers in the private sector, further widening the gap between public and private schools. Lastly, this policy does not cater to teachers situated in areas with poor technological advancement and for teachers who have poor technological skills. Consequently, teachers who do not have access to a computer or the internet, or teachers who do not have computer skills, are disadvantaged (CDE, 2015), thus questioning the context suitability of this policy.

The QMS was designed to identify teachers' needs and support teacher development. However, the flawed implementation of the policy has created further divisions in teachers' competencies (CDE, 2011).

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Research conducted by the CDE in 2015 and Ngema and Lekhetho in 2019 notes that this policy was not equally implemented across all South African schools. Many schools did not know how to implement this system because of poor training or simply did not have the time to implement it. Bernadine (2019) states that the salary increment that teachers and principals receive remains the main motivation behind the implementation of the QMS policy.

The policy-practice gap in teacher development highlights a growing problem in teacher education. Fortunately, these issues have been identified by the DBE, and in response, the DBE formed the ISPFTED. This framework seeks to improve the future of teacher development by setting realistic goals and context suited to teacher development initiatives. The ISPFTED uses context-suited approaches such as implementing PLCs to facilitate teachers' continuous professional growth and enhance collaboration among teachers. Furthermore, the ISPFTED seeks to bridge the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation, ensuring that teacher development initiatives yield significant improvements, ultimately improving learning outcomes.

PLCs are the Future of Teacher Development.

Modern teacher development programs are moving away from generic teacher development programs, such as workshops with one-way communication. Social learning theories seem to underpin modern-day teacher development initiatives (De Clercq & Phiri, 2013). Social learning, such as Wenger and Vygotsky's social learning theories, emphasizes the importance of collaborative organizational learning, stating that learning is a social process whereby colleagues share knowledge and experiences, which is then internalized, producing new knowledge.

Based on these theories, PLCs seem to be the future of teacher development programs, particularly for South African teacher development, as noted by the ISPFTED in 2011. PLCs offer a platform for teachers with varying expertise to come together and share their experiences, practices, and challenges. Through this process, teachers learn how to support each other and learn to work together to identify issues and solve them. They assist in building a collaborative culture of learning in schools, which is conducive to successful PLC programs and school improvement (Rayiramkandath, 2017; Lee & Louis, 2019).

Conclusion

Teachers are key role players in transforming the South African educational system and improving the education results of learners. But before they take on this mammoth task, they first need to be equipped with knowledge and skills required.

South Africa has policies in place to guide teacher development, although the current policies are poorly implemented, not contextually suited, and do not meet the demands of the educational system and the developmental needs of the teachers. Fortunately, the ISPFTED policy brings hope to the dismal state of teacher development in South Africa.

The ISPFTED policy looks at PLCs as the future of teacher development in South Africa. PLCs are a form of teacher development that is derived from social learning theories. This is a long way from previous approaches to teacher development, such as departmental-led, generic workshops. Organizational learning is the future of teacher development, and PLCs speak directly to the nature of organizational learning.

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Given the benefits of PLCs, I strongly believe that South African education has finally initiated a contextually suitable teacher development program. It is important to note that the success of PLCs is dependent on how they are implemented and the type of culture adopted by principals in schools.

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