

# Guideline for the practical orientation about PLC L&F

## Leafap

Leading and Facilitating Professional Learning Communities  
in Schools towards an Inquiry-based and Reflective Practice  
KA220-5CH - Cooperation partnerships in school education

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**Rosa M<sup>a</sup> Arcos de Torres, José Luis Carmona Maqueda,  
Alberto Corpas Martos, María del Mar Gallego García**

**Sofia Avgitidou, Katja Kansteiner, Anne Berit Emstad, Bård Knutsen,  
Elvira Barrios Espinosa, Carmen Sanchidrián Blanco, Mónica Torres Sánchez**

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PHW – University of Education Weingarten  
AUTH – Aristotelio Panepistimio Thessalonikis  
CEPMC – Centro del Profesorado Marbella-Coín  
CEPMLG – Centro del Profesorado de Málaga  
EUC – European University Cyprus  
NTNU – Norges Teknisk-Naturvitenskapelige Universitet  
PHV – University of Education Vorarlberg  
UMA – University of Malaga

**LeaFaP**  
**partners**

# 1. Introduction

The LeaFaP project<sup>1</sup> emerges from the collaboration of European Universities and In-service Teacher Training Centers committed to enhancing the competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) of educational leaders, teaching staff and student teachers, both during in-service and initial teacher education to effectively establish structured learning environments based on Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Most of the LeaFaP member institutions participated in previous Erasmus+ projects focused on the dissemination of PLC for both school leaders and practicing teachers (HeadsUP<sup>2</sup>), as well as in pre-service teacher education (TePinTeach<sup>3</sup>), in response to the international debate on the quality of school leadership and teaching. These projects formed teams with shared interests and visions, meeting regularly to expand their knowledge and improve their practices, ultimately benefiting their students. However, achieving the desired quality of a PLC requires more than mere cooperation; it requires specific professional training and support.

This guide draws from the international debate on PLC and the quality of school leadership and teaching. Collaboration among education professionals such as teachers and school leaders has long been recognized as a valuable activity that enhances professional competences and improves student learning. However, the quality of collaboration among teachers often needs improvement, as it requires a deeper level of engagement beyond typical superficial-level interactions, which are frequently insufficient for significant professional growth.

There is now ample evidence confirming that PLC promotes professional learning and improves teaching quality, school effectiveness, and student learning through structured collaboration among teachers. Furthermore, facilitation processes have been identified as critical for the settlement, sustainability and success of PLC. Effective facilitation is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.leafap.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/plcheadsup/home>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tepinteach.eu/>

multifaceted, however, requiring facilitators to possess a range of knowledge, skills and attitudes, including the capability to manage group interactions, build an environment of trust within the PLC and support members in reflecting on their practice and using data to guide decisions.

In light of the above considerations, the aim of this guide is threefold: to provide an overview of key concepts associated with PLC, to characterize the activities conducted and roles assumed by facilitators in establishing and maintaining effective PLC, and to explain how inquiry and reflection are central to the functioning and facilitation of professional learning-oriented PLC. The primary goal is to bridge the gap between theory and practice in PLC by presenting scientific findings in a practical manner for facilitators, as well as other school-related professionals who wish to understand the conceptual framework.

This guide draws on scientific literature and empirical results<sup>4</sup> documented in the following international reports and it is supported by previous national reports, in addition to the current situation of facilitation of learning groups with a particular focus on the quality aspects of inquiry and reflection activities in collaboration from the LeaFaP project partners:

- Leading and Facilitating Professional Learning Communities – Mapping the Theoretical Foundation by an International Literature Research. [1]
- International Report on PLC Leaders’ and Facilitators’ Experiences, Practices, Challenges and Needs. [2]
- Conceptual framework. PLC Facilitation. [3]
- Learning outcomes document. [4]

These resources “provided in the first part of this guideline” will clarify the meaning and significance of PLC as well as the basic requirements for their successful operation. The second part of the guideline presents the various roles of those involved in a PLC and the various dimensions that a facilitator of a PLC needs to regard or be conscious of to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.leafap.eu/results/>

support a PLC effectively. The last part focuses on the role of inquiry and reflection in assisting the critical awareness and knowledge building processes within a PLC.

Finally, we would like to clear up that this guide is specifically intended for those who serve as facilitators of PLC, but it is also useful for other education staff and stakeholders, including future educators, administrators, and teachers' union representatives.

## 2. What is a Professional Learning Community?

A PLC is a group of educators who collaborate and engage in a collective inquiry and reflection process to enhance teaching practices and student learning. The concept is grounded in the scientific evidence [5] that ongoing improvement and learning among educators can significantly elevate student educational outcomes. Below are key aspects that define this approach:

- 1. Collaborative Culture:** Educators share ideas and strategies in a supportive environment, fostering the exchange of beliefs, understandings and practices, and developing innovative solutions to common challenges in their practical work.
- 2. Focus on Student Learning:** The primary aim is to improve student learning by identifying their needs, designing teaching strategies and evaluating their impact. Educators work together to ensure that all decisions and practices prioritize maximizing student success and well-being.
- 3. Continuous Professional Development by Inquiry-Based Reflective Practice:** Educators participate in regular activities such as workshops, peer observations, and discussions to analyze and refine their practices. Systematic inquiry into their contexts and practices, based on critical reflection, is vital. This ongoing process of learning and improvement is crucial for adapting to student needs.
- 4. Shared Leadership:** Leadership is shared among members, encouraging collective accountability and empowerment. By distributing leadership responsibilities, each member contributes to decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement within the group. This collaborative approach helps ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more comprehensive and inclusive decisions.
- 5. Willingness to Design and Act:** There is a clear commitment among PLC members to implement changes and develop improvements in their teaching practices. This involves adopting an experimental attitude towards teaching and learning, where educators are open to trying new methods, reflecting on their effectiveness, and



making necessary adjustments. This proactive approach helps ensure that professional development initiatives and educational strategies evolve and remain relevant over time.

Professional Learning Communities can take many forms and compositions. They might include educators who teach the same subject, share classes, or belong to the same district. PLC can also involve school leaders, pre-service teachers, in-service trainers, or be linked to innovation projects. Despite their diversity, all PLC share a common goal: bringing practical challenges and issues into the PLC for mutual learning, critical awareness and transformation of practice. This collaborative process aims to improve teaching practices, professional learning and foster innovation.

## 2.1 School improvements with PLC

The primary advantage of PLC lies in their significant impact on teaching practice and student learning [1] [6] . By sharing their expertise, educators within PLC not only exchange effective pedagogical strategies but also collaborate to identify and address the specific needs of their students. This active collaboration, focused on student-centered approaches, ensures that educational practices are not only more impactful but also better tailored to promote meaningful and lasting learning.

Moreover, implementing PLC in schools can lead to numerous substantial improvements, including the following:

- 1. School as a Learning Organization:** PLC transforms schools into learning organizations. All members act as change agents, playing crucial roles in discussing and defining goals, promoting innovation processes, and ensuring outcomes. This fosters a school culture that continuously adapts and improves. Therefore, PLC is part of an innovative culture within the school organization.
- 2. Strengthening Teamwork:** PLC fosters a strong sense of community and teamwork. It not only cultivates a team spirit within specific groups but can also be used to connect all teaching staff. This ongoing exchange of ideas and strategies

enhances cooperation and promotes productive dialogue between school leadership and teachers, driving school development.

- 3. Improvement of Learning Culture and School Climate:** Participation in PLC enhances the learning culture and school climate. When all educators collaborate for improvement, this translates into more effective teaching and successful learning for students. Consequently, PLC can support both organizational and personal development.
- 4. Evidence-Based Educational Practices:** PLC enables the implementation and evaluation of new teaching and learning methodologies. By basing decisions on concrete data and reflecting on results, educators can continuously refine their practices. This ensures that the strategies used are the most effective for student learning.
- 5. Professional Development and Attitudinal Change:** Engaging in PLC contributes to continuous professional learning and development. It helps educators to form a shared vision, inquire into their work, exchange knowledge effectively, reflect, and develop the knowledge and skills needed to innovate in school practices. Additionally, PLC fosters an attitude change, shifting from individual perceptions and decisions to integrated and collaborative teaching practices. This not only makes daily work more satisfying but also enhances collaboration among professionals.

In summary, PLC is a powerful method or tool for transforming schools. It fosters a culture of collaboration, continuous learning, and data-driven decision-making. By working together to improve teaching, educators can create a more effective and enriching educational environment for all students.

## 2.2 Requirements for a successful PLC

In both schools and universities, educators collaborate extensively, primarily exchanging information about students and organizational matters, and sharing workload. However, there is often insufficient time dedicated to learning from one another, questioning different perspectives, and acquiring new professional knowledge to reconsider daily



routines. PLC emphasizes this aspect of collaboration and, therefore, establishes specific requirements.

### **1. Time for PLC Development**

One of the most crucial factors for PLC success is allowing ample time for development. This implies not only scheduling considerations but also dedicating working hours to in-service training and one's own professional development. Viewing PLC development as an integral part of job requirements, rather than as a complementary activity, is essential to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability.

### **3. Internal Commitment and External Support**

The commitment of PLC members is essential for its effective functioning. Maintaining a close relationship between PLC development activities and teachers' real classroom work is important. Additionally, integrating external support, such as expertise and additional resources, enriches discussions with diverse perspectives and provides access to specialized knowledge.

### **2. Efficient Structure and Collaboration**

Ensuring the success of a PLC depends on members getting to know each other and collaborating based on an efficient structure. This involves scheduling regular meetings with a clear agenda and defined focus, as well as planning long-term development changes with a detailed action plan setting milestones. According to project experience and country-specific insights, PLC works best with groups of four to eight members.

### **4. Overall Support Framework**

Establishing and maintaining PLC successfully requires a comprehensive support framework at both the school and district levels. This framework should facilitate the initiation and stabilization of PLC not only by providing essential infrastructure, such as meeting spaces and scheduled times for collaboration, but also by ensuring they are well-integrated and sustainable in the medium and long term.

As we've shown, the success of PLC depends on several interconnected factors, including dedicated time, efficient structure, internal commitment, external support, and a solid support framework. By following these recommendations, school leaders and facilitators

can establish and maintain effective PLC that significantly contribute to professional development and teaching improvement in their schools.

### 2.3 What is expected of PLC members

The responsibilities of PLC members are not usually specified. Rather, there is a general expectation for PLC members to be actively engaged in PLC activities and to manifest an open-to-learning attitude. We specify this ambiguous statement in the following decalogue of expected tasks:

1	Participate in a dialogical way in meetings and undertake actions of decision-making
2	Plan and pursue changes in practice
3	Present their practices to other colleagues
4	Reflect on their and on other PLC members' beliefs and practice
5	Support others by engaging communication with comments, suggestions, and proposals
6	Take part in inquiry activities
7	Contribute to the design of teaching or be involved in co-teaching
8	Collaborate in peer observation and other methodological ways
9	Take decisions based on data analysis, assessment and evaluation
10	Engage in teachers' training activities tailored to their needs and contexts

Table 1. Expected tasks for PLC members

### **3. Facilitation in a Professional Learning Community**

As we have described in the previous chapter, PLC members meet regularly to analyze their teaching practices, jointly address the issues they encounter every day in the classroom and generate shared knowledge in order to improve their performance in the classroom and consequently improve student learning.

In the case of schools, educator groups or student groups, with no previous experience in a PLC, a facilitator is needed to guide PLC members. But we would like to enhance that the role of the facilitator should be temporary in time.

Initially, the facilitator will be the one to organize the process. Throughout the scaffolding, the facilitator will involve all the members in the design of the inquiry, the analysis of data, and the subsequent reflection about it. The aim is to guide the group until it becomes autonomous and all PLC members are able to design and evaluate their teaching practices on the basis of the research carried out.

#### **3.1 Facilitators and school leadership in a PLC**

The role of the facilitator in PLC is central. The facilitator is responsible for creating a trustful environment, stimulating inquiry and reflection, providing access to relevant resources, providing continuous feedback and assisting participants to generate knowledge derived from their own practice.

A facilitator can be either an external specialist or a member of the group. Sometimes there is even the possibility of alternating the role of facilitator of the meeting among the participants.

In case we consider school/institute PLC, regardless of whether there is an external facilitator or not, principals should give support to the PLC which are being developed there, as some of their responsibilities are to structure school work, foster collegiality and promote processes that lead to the improvement of school results.

Sometimes the actions of a school leader can be considered, to some extent, as

facilitation activities. There is a fine line that divides them, especially when they address collective reflective processes to detect opportunities for improvement in the school/institute and promote the joint search for solutions to improve the teaching-learning process.

### 3.2 Activities related to facilitation

We concluded in our International Report [x] that some papers only mention facilitation as a person or support structure that is beneficial without any proof or further information, while others list detailed activities that are carried out during facilitation. We show an overview on the main activities of the facilitation:

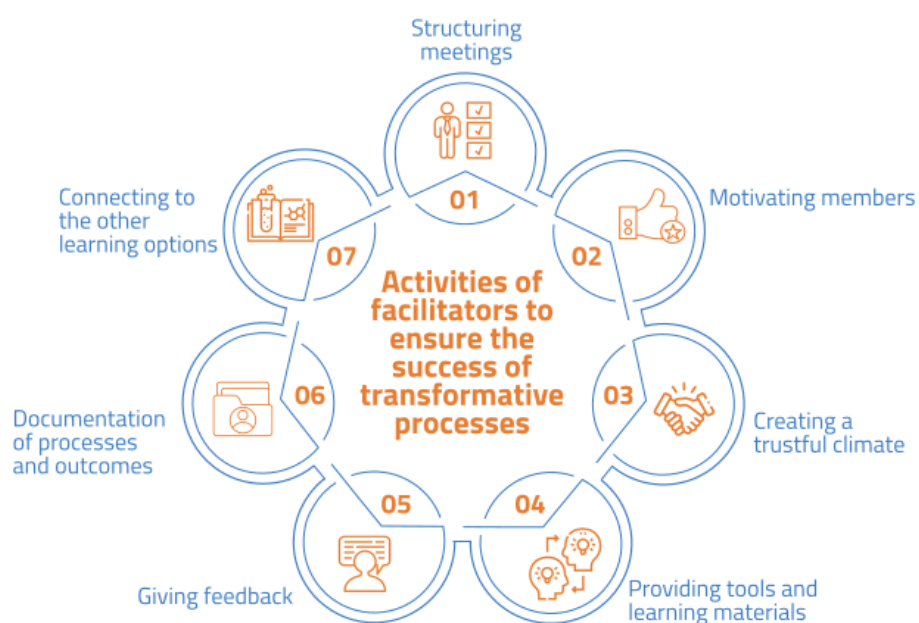


Figure 1. Activities of facilitators to ensure the success of transformative processes

From an overall perspective, facilitation is not always explicitly linked to our focal interest of inquiry and reflection. The results of the literature review describe facilitation already done by structuring PLC meetings well or by motivating members when the PLC faces challenges either in the PLC dynamics or about the practical teaching (leading) issue.

Others talk about providing tools and materials that serve either the progress in PLC work (e.g., SWOT analysis for meta-reflection) or learning about the issue (professional readings). Some papers seem to expect, or point out clearly, that the facilitation secures transformative processes. Feedback given from the facilitator to the PLC on the issue or the PLC dynamics is reported to assist these transformative processes.

### **3.3 Dimensions of facilitating competencies**

One of the objectives of our project was to deepen facilitation in Professional Learning Communities. The conclusions we came to is that although facilitation is highlighted across all scientific papers, there is little information about detailed competencies facilitators should have. We also made an empirical research of facilitators' and leaders' experiences, as well as the perceptions of their roles.

The review of theoretical and empirical knowledge led to the development of a Conceptual framework for PLC [3] and the specification of learning outcomes to provide facilitators with essential knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to effectively promote and support PLC.

We consider that one of the goals of the LeaFaP project is to provide a clear description of these competencies.

#### **1. Relational dimension**

Since PLC members are expected to share the issues they have to face every day in their classroom and schools, it is quite important that a facilitator fosters supportive relationships, promotes empathy, respect, and trust-building. Supporting a collaborative and safe environment is a key for PLC creation and collaboration.

#### **2. Communicative dimension**

It is very important to settle down within the group effective communication principles, including active listening and assertive communication. A facilitator must moderate and guide communication, summarize discussions effectively, and engage the group in conversations about communication within the group.

### **3. Collaborative focus dimension**

It is crucial to promote a collaborative culture within the PLC beyond surface-level exchanges, as well as to support a collective responsibility for the professional development of the PLC members. It is very important to encourage all members to express their ideas in a respectful way.

In case there is not an equal participation of all the PLC members, the facilitator should use group activities to overcome this situation.

### **4. Learning and knowledge building dimension**

Facilitators need to ensure that each PLC meeting contributes to learning and knowledge building by encouraging dialogue among the participants, detecting similar and different views and summing up the conclusions of the meeting and steps forward. Decisions must be made based on data analysis and information provided by inquiry of the context, beliefs and practices of PLC members. Not all of them are equally trained to use inquiry strategies and resources. Thus, a facilitator should recognize diverse needs and offer personalized support and guidance to address specific challenges supporting each member to expand his or her knowledge base and implement effective professional methods.

### **5. Inquiry and Reflection dimension**

One of the first tasks of the facilitator is to clarify what Inquiry and Reflection (I&R) mean, and promote the scaffolding of PLC regarding the issues that concern them in a specific context. Facilitator should combine different points of view to define the working framework of the PLC.

Initially, it is very important to help PLC members become aware of their belief systems and the effects of their practices. At this moment, they will be able to identify their needs and their improvement opportunities.

One of PLC goals is creating a shared discourse. Guiding members in reflecting on their beliefs and practices, and leveraging data and scientific results for evaluating, understanding and reflecting on their own practice, leads to informed decision-making. To



facilitate inquiry and reflection on practice, members should be familiarized with basic data analysis techniques relevant to educational research.

Feedback is one of the most powerful tools that a facilitator can use. It should be organized in reflection questions based on members' beliefs, ideas and practices as well as on the use of theories to analyze them. Facilitators should take into account in the construction of their feedback aspects such as the level of participation of PLC members, or how the shared knowledge is providing effective opportunities that allow everyone to improve.

We are enhancing the importance of promoting inquiry and reflection between members of a PLC, and facilitators cannot remain indifferent to this reflective practice. It is also crucial that facilitators undergo self-analysis and reflect upon their role to improve the facilitation process and outcomes, and create their own Personal Learning Environment (PLE) .

## **6. Digital dimension**

Nowadays many of the meetings can be organized through online platforms where PLC members can share ideas, materials and reflective reports with the use of digital tools, so possessing digital competencies is necessary and advisable.

Facilitators can also use digital tools in order to create documents and graphic organizers, as well as to promote reflection and the participation of all members in online sessions.

## **7. Organizational dimension**

We should not underestimate this dimension since an ineffective space-time organization can spoil the work done by the group members. So facilitators should pay attention to manage logistical aspects of PLC functioning in an effective way to ensure regular meetings and maintain focus on tasks. Additionally, a facilitator should monitor activities and progress of the PLC and handle documentation efficiently.

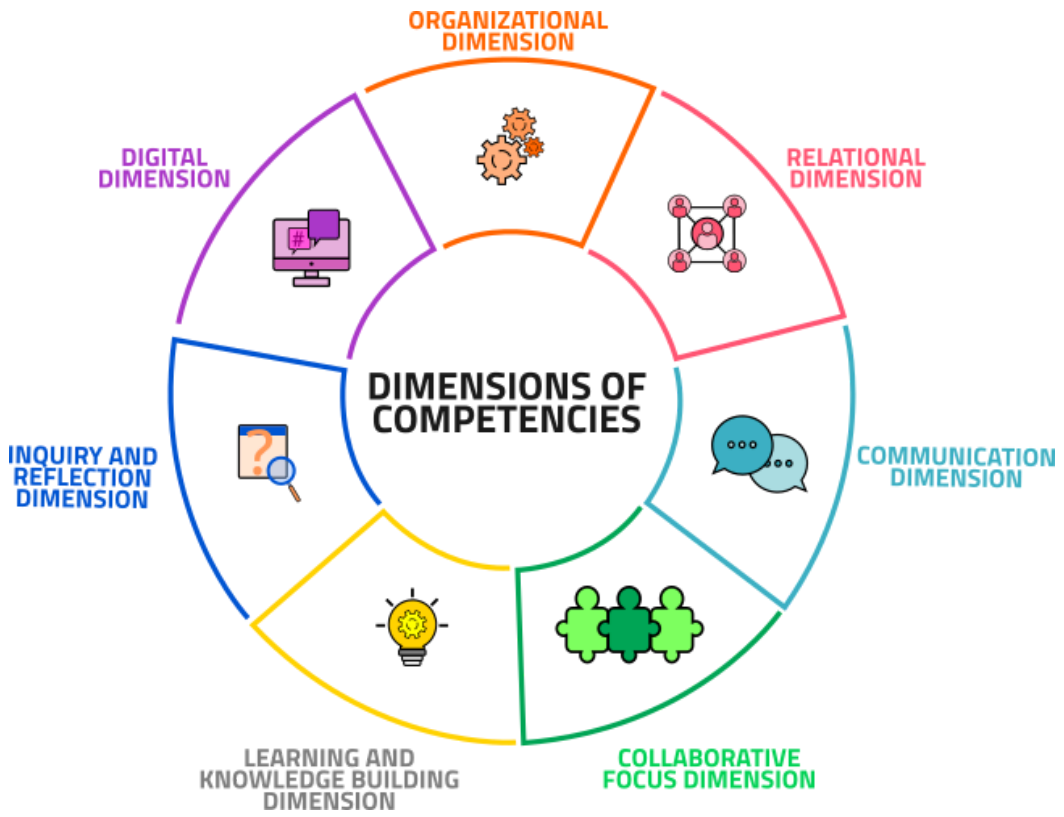


Figure 2. Dimensions of competencies of facilitators

## 4. Inquiry and Reflection

These concepts are critically linked to the development of a PLC, so it is very important to everyone involved to understand their meaning. One of the first tasks is to clarify within the group what these ideas mean and promote the scaffolding of PLC's inquiry and reflection regarding the issue that concerns them in their specific context.. Despite the fact that Inquiry and Reflection (I&R) are portrayed as something that happens during PLC meetings, the content, direction and support of reflection need to be clearly specified.



Figure 3. Influencing factors and conceptual aspects of I&R in a PLC

Professionals need to be supported to become reflective practitioners in order to reach a critical awareness of contexts and practices, foster their continuous professional learning and improve their teaching practices. I&R also characterize the process of collaboration within PLC and is a key element for the accompanying investigation [1] [7] and development of teaching practice, based on trust and openness to critical thinking and alternative beliefs and strategies.

I&R also need trust and respect and mutual encouragement to reach understanding and agreements. PLC members exchange views and proposals in a democratic way, share equal or complementary roles and participate jointly in the identification of common issues and decision-making. While the institutional context may restrict the decisions of a PLC, its members seek to extend the margins of their actions and their autonomy for decision making.

Sharing previous knowledge is strongly recommended for the success of PLC. I&R could be developed through different research methods, like lesson study, design-based approach, self-/and peer-evaluation, interviews/questionnaires or action-research. It is important to engage other members of the educational community, like students or families, in the investigation process to provide different perspectives of the issue at hand. I&R facilitate reflection and can be complemented by joint readings and engaging in meaningful dialogues.

In any case, I&R start from a research question agreed upon by the PLC members, followed by an initial investigation and analysis of the reasons that this specific situation occurs. A phase of designing an action plan based on the collected data and reflection that will then be implemented, evaluated and revised succeeds is useful in order to generate a new cycle.

If educators do not have the necessary skills to successfully carry out this research, they may be assisted by an external facilitator. The learning-oriented collaboration can benefit from monitoring PLC processes and interchanges.

## 5. Conclusions and future prospects

In general terms, for the elaboration of this guideline, we have taken as reference the previous documents created in the LeaFaP project, transferring scientific knowledge to professional school development.

The next step will be the creation of activities which include methods, tasks, assignments, communicative prompts, and instruments on issues of deep learning, inquiry, and reflection in an ongoing PLC. All of these will be designed in an accessible and inclusive way, as they support the horizontal priority "Inclusion and Diversity" and address diverse groups of educational staff, as well as diverse individuals within those groups.

All these activities will be organized into a modular training course for promoting PLC leadership and facilitation for inquiry and reflection. Through this training, PLC facilitators will be able to develop the dimensions described in this guide and reflect on their position and tasks while working in a democratic learning group setting. As soon as these resources are developed, they will be available on the project webpage.

All our work is focused on contributing to the development of new knowledge that promotes the progress of PLC in different educational scenarios. Ensuring that a PLC runs properly is ensuring that teaching staff have the chance to deepen their pedagogical and didactic competencies as well.

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