Community of Practice:
Learning from each other through sharing good practices and solving challenges
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Dear Reader,

The 9th edition of our peer learning magazine for teachers and school leaders is out. This edition focuses on Community of Practice, a platform at school level where teachers meet face to face with the objective of learning with and from each other through solving challenges and sharing good practices.

Teaching is a profession and professionals do always need to challenge and improve their practice through knowledge acquisition and sharing. School based mentors and school subject leaders have a responsibility to support their fellow teachers at their school. They do this by providing guidance and opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) to both new and experienced teachers. Part of the CPD is to organise and facilitate effective Communities of Practice for teachers in their respective schools as part of new teachers’ induction and, more broadly, general teacher professional development. A Community of Practice normally follows a problem-solving structure: identification; analysis and planning; reflection and consolidation; dissemination and evaluation, and we believe it is an important platform to address different teaching and learning challenges in a more practical way.

A challenge being faced by one school might have been solved long ago by another school. Learning how other schools have identified and addressed challenges including those handled through Communities of Practice, can inspire your school to deal with the ones you are already facing and/or struggling to resolve. Furthermore, given the fact that a teacher is an action researcher, teacher’s daily practice and experience is expected to inspire peers, both at his/her school (through Community of Practice) and beyond. Undoubtedly, learning from peers is an important addition to learning activities that can enhance the quality of education.

I recommend that continuous professional development, and Communities of Practice in particular, go beyond formalities and be the source of the positive changes desired in terms of students learning outcomes.

I also wish to acknowledge the continued support and collaboration with partners in promoting quality education in Rwanda, such as VVOB-education for development. VVOB works with University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE) and Rwanda Education Board to strengthen school leadership through mentoring and coaching, to support teachers and enable high quality instruction. VVOB and UR-CE together deliver certificate and diploma courses for system and school-based leaders and provide opportunities for teachers and school leaders to encourage one another in supportive professional learning communities, in primary and secondary schools in 17 districts. In secondary education, the certificate and diploma courses are being offered in 14 districts as part of the Mastercard Foundation Leaders in Teaching initiative, an initiative that transforms teaching and learning in secondary education across Africa so young people have the skills and competencies they need to succeed in work and life.

We hope that you enjoy reading this magazine that offers teachers and school leaders the opportunity, among other opportunities, to learn from each other. We believe that you will contribute to this platform by sharing your experiences and good practices to enhance quality of education in Rwanda.
What is a Community of Practice?

By Karolina Rutkowska
Education Advisor, VVOB

School based mentors (SBMs) and school subject leaders (SSLs) have a responsibility to support their fellow teachers. They do this by providing guidance and opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) to both new and experienced teachers.

Part of the CPD is to organise and facilitate effective Communities of Practice (CoPs) for teachers in their respective schools as part of new teachers’ induction and, more broadly, general teacher professional development. Rwanda Education Board defines CoP as “a group of colleagues who meet regularly to discuss their work. They think of solutions to challenges and share good practice”.

I. PURPOSE OF A CoP

CoP sessions are conducted by SBMs and SSLs on a regular basis and they are a platform at school level where teachers meet face to face with the objective of learning with and from each other through solving challenges and sharing good practices. During CoP sessions the members focus on finding solutions to challenges regarding teaching and learning, the implementation of the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) and the induction of new teachers.

The CoP sessions facilitated by SSLs to which mathematics and STEM subject teachers are invited, focus more on subject-related challenges, whereas the CoP sessions facilitated by SBMs focus on more general challenges in teaching and learning that are not necessarily related to a specific teaching subject. Examples of challenges addressed in CoPs: organising effective and realistic formative assessment for mathematics in large classes, effectively addressing students’ gender stereotypes in class, differentiating class assignments for faster and slower learners, motivating students to complete their homework, etc.

If the try-outs were successful, the members will document the lessons learnt and will discuss how they can consolidate these lessons.

If the try-outs however were not successful, the group will analyse the challenge on a deeper level.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE CoP CYCLE

Each school year, teachers who are members of a CoP go through one or more CoP cycles together. One complete CoP cycle consists of at least 3 sessions but can take as many sessions as necessary to find effective solutions for an identified priority challenge. The first and the last CoP session only
happen once in a CoP cycle. The middle CoP session however can be repeated several times until an adequate solution has been found for the existing challenge. Each CoP session has specific outputs with concrete actions to be accomplished before the next session takes place.

Inspired by Rwanda Education Board’s PDSI process for CPD (PDSI standing for Plan, Do, See and Improve), CoP sessions will also follow a problem-solving structure: (1) identification, analysis and planning, (2) reflection and consolidation and (3) dissemination and evaluation.

First CoP session: identification, analysis and planning

During the first CoP session the members will identify all challenges they face in teaching and learning, the implementation of the CBC and/or their induction of new teachers. They will first classify these priorities into three areas:

- Challenges they can directly control (direct control - linked to own behaviour).
- Challenges they can control with the help of others (indirect control - linked to other people’s behaviour).
- Challenges they can’t control (out of control - outside of their zone of influence).

Then they will prioritise the challenges that are in their direct and indirect control and select about two challenges that will be the focus of that CoP cycle. The members will analyse these prioritised challenges and discuss possible solutions. After a discussion of potential solutions, the members will plan activities to overcome the challenges.

After the CoP session, each member will go back to their teaching schedule and implement the planned activities to overcome the challenges. The members who are implementing the activities will take notes on how their try-outs went so it can be discussed during the next CoP session.

Middle CoP session(s): reflection and consolidation

During this next CoP session, the members will reflect on the tried-out approaches. The members who tried out their activities will share the results. The group will discuss the pros and cons of the tried-out approach and reflect on its effectiveness. If the try-outs were successful, the members will document the lessons learnt and will discuss how they can consolidate these lessons. Once they decide on the consolidation actions, they will plan to execute them.

If the try-outs however were not successful, the group will analyse the challenge on a deeper level using the ‘Action, Looking back on the Action, Creation of alternative methods of action and Trial’ (ALACT) method. Following this analysis, they will discuss new possible solutions and plan for a second try-out. As long as the tried-out approaches don’t yield the expected results, the CoP members will repeat this middle session. Only when the members have found an effective solution for their prioritised challenges will they proceed to discuss and plan consolidation efforts.

After the CoP session, if the try-outs were successful, each member will go back to their teaching schedule and carry out the consolidation efforts. Consolidating the lessons learnt can take on different forms such as developing teaching and learning materials, writing a case study, developing a new assessment tool, write a story of change, etc. If the try-outs were not successful, after the CoP session, each member will go back to their teaching schedule and implement the second try-out activities to overcome the challenges. The members who are implementing these activities will take notes on how their second try-outs went so it can be discussed during the next CoP session.

Last CoP session: dissemination and evaluation

In the last CoP session, members will share and review the consolidation efforts they undertook. With the consolidation outputs ready they will discuss and plan how to disseminate them to their colleagues beyond the CoP group and the wider school community. As this concludes one full CoP cycle, the members will reflect on the effectiveness of the action-oriented CoP cycle and discuss how to make the next cycle even better.

After the last CoP session, the members go back to their teaching schedule and implement the dissemination plan.

See the visualisation of a CoP cycle on the next page. Would you like to learn more about CoP? Download a copy of "Communities of Practice Framework" developed in consultation with REB: http://rwanda.vvob.org/publications.
Visualisation of a CoP cycle

1. IDENTIFICATION, ANALYSIS & PLANNING
   - Select at most two priority challenges
   - Analyse teachers' challenges (goal, reality, resources)
   - Discuss the possible solutions
   - Plan activities to overcome the challenge

Activities In Between
   - Review consolidation efforts
   - Plan to disseminate beyond your CoP
   - Assess the effectiveness of the CoP cycle and just work through

First CoP session
   - After a completed CoP cycle, the SSL or SBM submits a final report to the HU. A new CoP cycle starts.

2. REFLECTION & CONSOLIDATION
   - Teachers share the results of the try-outs
   - Reflect on and discuss the pros-and-cons of the tried-out approach
   - Analyse the situation on a deeper level (ALADT) and make new resolutions
   - Plan 2nd try-out activities
   - Plan consolidation efforts (individual or as group)

Mid CoP session(s)
   - Successful: Extract the lessons learnt and discuss how to consolidate them
   - Not successful: Extract the lessons learnt and discuss how to consolidate them

Activities In Between
   - Teachers carry out the consolidation efforts

Last CoP session
   - Teachers carry out the dissemination of the consolidated lessons learnt

Activities In Between
   - Teachers carry out the consolidation efforts

3. DISSEMINATION & EVALUATION
   - Examples of consolidation efforts: write a story of success, film a teaching method, develop a new assessment tool, develop a series of lesson plans, learning materials for peers
A glance at school-based mentorship programme in Rwandan schools

By Gerard Murasira
Director of Teacher Training Unit, REB

Professionals in all domains benefit from an ongoing professional development to keep abreast with the complexities and cutting edge skills of this widely changing world. Rwanda Education Board has put in place a variety of mechanisms of teacher professional development (CPD) in all schools across the country including the School-Based Mentorship Programme (SBMP).

The latter has undergone restructuring and the current SBMP is a practice that consists of tasking at least one more experienced teacher with professional skills and ethics at every school with a responsibility of professionally supporting fellow teachers through teacher mentoring and coaching that is contextualised to teachers’ place of work realities.

CPD models practised in Rwanda include but not limited to community of practice (CoP), school-based in-service training (SBI), peer lesson observation, self-study and formal training organised by Rwanda Education Board or education development partners.

Three objectives lead to the School-Based Mentorship Programme namely:

1. To provide a highly resourced person at school level who is capable of organising teacher professional development in all areas;

2. To Maintain a corps of qualified English speaking teachers who are competent in competence based practices;

3. To Institutionalise systems for school-based continuous professional development and support the cycle of improving teaching through experience and sharing best practices.

The SBMP in Rwanda has undergone restructuring that resulted into the current structure whereby one teacher is identified at every public and government aided school and two mentors at sector level commonly known as mentor trainers (MTs). The school and sector-based mentors in collaboration with school head teachers and sector education officer organise CPD activities at the level they are appointed for as general role.

They are therefore in charge of:

1. Assisting teachers in improving English language skills;

2. Supporting teachers in improving pedagogical skill for competence-based teaching and learning

3. Organising professional development activities;

4. Stimulating reflection and facilitate giving feedback on quality of teaching and learning.

Improvements in education largely depend on quality of teachers, so School Based Mentors (SBMs) and Mentor Trainers are committed to supporting teachers to grow professionally. Remarkable achievements have been recorded since the establishment of SBMP despite a number of challenges.

Besides, the SBMs cannot attain the SBMP objectives without the support of the school Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers. So, school leaders are urged to provide all needed support for successful CPD activities at school level.

I extend my gratitude to all stakeholders and education development partners for working tirelessly to support CPD programmes to enhance the quality education.
According to you, why is it important to implement Community of Practice in schools?

CoP is important because it’s a platform in which teachers share. Due to the fact that CoPs are organised by teachers themselves, it creates a space for them to feel free and share their daily challenges and concerns. It’s very different from a normal meeting conducted by the school authorities!

Members of a CoP get to sit together and exchange on the challenges they are facing and get solutions from their fellow teachers. The end results: improvement of teaching and learning, which will lead to high students’ performance.

School authorities can also attend CoP activities, and they have to respect that umbrella of freedom. School authorities can be members and source of support. It’s not the place to see weaknesses of people. It is a place to support, not to supervise or evaluate.

What kind of issues can be addressed through Community of Practice?

Many issues can be addressed through CoP. Let me give some examples:

Managing big classes can be a challenge faced in a CoP cycle: the members can talk about using grouping techniques, exercises in groups, team teaching as some of the possible solutions. They can discuss and explore solutions together. For instance, to address the issue of big classroom, some teachers volunteer to help a colleague to teach a lesson together (team teaching) during their free time. I found this very effective as far as improving learning and teaching is concerned.

Integrating eight cross-cutting issues in the lesson plan is still a challenge and it can be explored through CoP. The SBM I visited has been teaching the members how to do it one at a time through lesson observation—one teacher does it, others follow.

Addressing teaching aids issue:
This was also an issue addressed through CoP at the schools I visited. They tried improvisation of teaching aids. They asked teachers to suggest teaching aids and use them and then share their experiences during CoP session, reflecting on how it worked. They now have a box where they keep improvised teaching aids. They have tried this technique and are still trying it. So far, it has shown positive results.

What were your impressions about the supportive field visit you conducted?

It was nice to see colleagues meeting to discussing challenges they face at their workplace. A workplace is like a family… where we are always, where people become brothers, sisters, it’s your address, a place where you should always meet and discuss challenges and find solutions. It should be a place you enjoy. Every challenge should be discussed. I noticed that when people feel free and comfortable with each other, it leads to a smooth working and learning environment.
Based on the supportive field visit you conducted, what has been the impact of CoP in schools?

CoP made teachers realise that they need to work together as a team, to support one another. When teachers meet and exchange, for instance, those in lower level meet the ones in upper level and it increased good working relationship and teamwork and teachers are proud of it.

CoP is contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning. Teachers testify that issues are identified and addressed through CoP sessions and were indeed able to improve their teaching by learning from their peers.

What are the challenges that can be faced in CoPs?

- Teaching load of SBMs is one of the setbacks.
- Some teachers think that they’re qualified and competent enough, hence not willing to actively participate nor implement the resolutions (try-outs) planned together. However, there is hope that such mindset will disappear as school leaders get involved in following up CoPs.

- School leaders support is still lacking in some schools. However, there is another weakness on the side of SBMs: there are cases where a SBM attends trainings on improving mentorship and coaching but do not share what he/she learnt with the school management to get support to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills. In such situation you cannot blame school leaders of not supporting the SBM/SSL to facilitate CoPs or other CPD activities.
- SBMs are encouraged to share with their HTs what they have learnt in different trainings. I realised that in schools where school leaders benefited from UR-CE-VVOB diploma programme in Effective School Leadership, support to SBMs in conducting CPD activities is high.

Did you notice outstanding practices that other schools can learn from?

Yes! When an SBM is showing motivation and confidence in practicing CPD activities and CoP, it leads to good CoPs sessions, where teachers can share their challenges and receive feedback. Motivation, confidence and good communication are key!

I also noticed that having a good relationship with the head teacher helps the SBM to motivate the teachers. It is crucial to have that collaboration. A good relationship between the SBM and the teachers is also very important - on a daily basis, not only in CoP sessions.

What would you recommend SBMs for a successful CoP cycle?

1. I recommend the creation of a continuous networking platform. Networks are needed for SBMs to discuss and get insights and experiences on CPD activities. It can help those who are still struggling and have difficulties in organising CoPs. They can share ideas through Whatsapp group.

2. Advocate at the school level to incorporate CPD activities including CoP in the school budget. Otherwise, it will be hard to get the materials needed if it was not planned.

3. Develop a good CPD plan that clearly indicates the resources and the time needed. Then, share it with your head teacher. Once finalised, hang it in the staff room.

4. Be a role model in your school. Be organised, be on time, be committed and focus on your plan, then the teachers will be motivated too.
Students' absenteeism, misbehaviour, insufficiency of teaching aids...addressed through Communities of Practice

Stella Musinguzi (SM) is a school based mentor at G.S Cyabayaga in Nyagatare District since 2012. Together with her colleagues they already completed a CoP cycle. In an interview with the Peer Learning Magazine Urunana rw’abarezi, she shares her experience about CoP facilitation.

By Julius Sebuhalala
Education Advisor, VVOB

Urunana rw’abarezi: In the Cop cycle you already completed, what challenge(s) did you address?

SM: We had many challenges, such as late coming of students, absenteeism, insufficiency of teaching and learning materials, students misbehaviour, among others.

Urunana rw’abarezi: How long did it take to complete the whole cycle?

SM: It took us approximately two month.

Urunana rw’abarezi: How many teachers do you have in this school?

SM: We have a total of 62 teachers in both primary and secondary education.

Urunana rw’abarezi: How many participated in the CoP cycle?

SM: Almost all teachers, a few missed with a valid reasons.

Urunana rw’abarezi: What were the criteria to select the teachers who participated to the CoP?

SM: We follow the continuous professional development (CPD) plan. CoP sessions are mainly organised at a department level. Sometimes we organise CoP session at school level and invite all teachers to attend.

Urunana rw’abarezi: Was it your first time organising a CoP cycle?

SM: Yes, but we had such platforms using different terminologies.

General reflection on the CoP cycle

Urunana rw’abarezi: How was your general experience about facilitating CoP sessions?

SM: I was impressed on the way teachers are motivated and interested not only in CoP but also in other CPD activities in general.

Urunana rw’abarezi: What were your biggest challenges? How did you overcome them?

SM: Lack of materials such as text books for try-out on the resolution taken about discussed challenges.

Urunana rw’abarezi: Did you have issues motivating your fellow teachers to take part in CoP sessions?

SM: In the beginning some teachers were reluctant to join the CoP as they had not clearly understood the importance of such a platform. I talked to the head teacher and he helped me to explain the purpose of CoP. He also supported in terms of providing needed materials like flip charts, manila papers, markers to use during a CoP session.

Urunana rw’abarezi: What other support do the school authorities provide for a smooth running of CoPs?

SM: The head teacher allowed us time on the school time table. Every Friday afternoon we meet as CoP members and discuss challenges that we face, share experiences and suggest possible solutions to address them.

Urunana rw’abarezi: Reflecting on the CoP cycle that you’ve been through with your fellow teachers, what did you do to make the purpose of each CoP session clear to all members?

SM: I try to involve every member by asking him/her to share their expectations, then we reach a consensus on what we expect at the end of a CoP cycle.

Urunana rw’abarezi: How did you manage to create a trusty and respectful environment?

SM: On top of being CoP members they are my teacher colleagues whom we share the same vision: improving learning outcomes. Explaining the role of CoP in improving teaching and learning which is every teacher’s concern, was key to building trust among them. Being open, listening attentively, agreeing on house keeping rules, letting every one contribute also increased trust and nurtures mutual respect.

Urunana rw’abarezi: According to you, why is it crucial to have good relationships within the CoP members?

SM: Without mutual understanding between CoP members, the objectives of a CoP can not be achieved. There is need for good relationship to learn from each other and reach a consensus. Good relationships build friendly and favourable atmosphere among CoP members and leads to better and sustainable results.

Urunana rw’abarezi: What was your strategy to engage all the members in the CoP sessions?

SM: I informed the members that CoP isn’t a one man’s show/activity, that there is need to work together to achieve a common goal.

"I informed my colleagues that CoP is not a one man’s show, that there is need to work together to achieve a common goal."
Resolving one issue at a time....

### First CoP session

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: What did you plan to do to address the identified challenges?

**SM**: One of the key issues we agreed to address was the insufficiency of teaching and learning materials. We agreed to use Internet to get teaching resources online, photocopying relevant text books, visit nearby schools to learn from them.

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: What were the key steps of the first session of your CoP cycle?

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### Middle CoP session(s)

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: What were the try-outs planned to address the challenges?

**SM**: Photocopying some text books to be used in class, use of Internet to get materials online and organise schools visit for learning.

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: Did the try-outs work? What were your resolutions?

**SM**: Yes, the try outs worked well. After the trying out successfully we planned to share the experience with other colleagues.

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### Final CoP session

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: What did you do in the last CoP session to consolidate efforts/actions to tackle those challenges permanently in your school?

**SM**: We met at department level and agreed to continue with try-outs until challenges have been solved. We also involved the head teacher so that he can continue supporting CoP especially in helping to allocate time for CoP and ensure that teachers participate. The emphasis has been put on explaining how a CoP session is different from a normal meeting, so that all teachers can have a common understanding of a CoP.

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: What was your plan to disseminate your results beyond your CoP?

**SM**: Best success stories are documented and displayed in the staff room for everyone to read and get inspired.

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### Sharing best tips for successful CoP

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: To inspire other schools, what advice would you give to an SBM about CoP?

- They need to involve all the CoP members. It is good to also rotate the facilitator role instead of having the SBM facilitate all the time.
- Respecting the views of other members is one of the key building bloc for a successful CoP.
- The school management should be involved. CoPs can not be sustained if the school management is ignored.
- Make sure you’ve well explained the purpose, focus, importance and expectations of a CoP.
- You need to establish a good relationship with teachers.

**Urunana rw'abarezi**: Looking back on how you organised the CoP cycle, what would you improve next time?

**SM**: Gender balance to ensure equal participation of both male and female teachers. Yes, female teachers participate but not very active as compared to male teachers. They are a bit reserved and the number is still small.

### CoPs in the eyes of teachers

**Abel Mwunvanzea and Birarushya Samuel** have been teachers for nine and 15 years respectively at G.S Cycabayaga. They teach Biology and Chemistry and are members of a CoP at this school. They also shared their experience about CoP.

#### How was your experience about CoP?

We’re members of the CoP. CoPs are good, we appreciate them because it’s the way through which teachers can handle their challenges and get solutions for better teaching and learning.

#### According to you, what is the impact of CoP in your school?

The challenge of insufficiency of teaching resources was discussed and solved thanks to CoPs.

#### What advice would you give to teachers from other schools about CoP?

CoPs should be conducted regularly, at least once in a week to be effective. The more regular the more successful they will be.
Alice Yankurije has been a teacher and a mentor teacher for the last five years. She currently teaches at G.S Rukizi EAR in Gicumbi District, where she was transferred from another school last year. Mrs. Yankurije was facilitating communities of practice (CoP) where she was teaching before, but when she joined the new school it became a bit challenging.

“I first worked with primary school teachers. I have been facilitating CoP sessions but have not completed a CoP cycle yet,” she said.

CoP challenges at G.S Rukizi

The school also didn’t have a head teacher nor deputy head teacher when Mrs. Yankurije joined. It was not easy for her as there were no school leaders to support. “The school spent about eight months without a school leader. I believe all challenges in organizing CoP were related to this. At the beginning I focused on new teachers. I first gathered them to identify different challenges related to teaching and learning. I introduced something called ‘Community of Practice’ which was new in the ears of almost every teacher! However, they found it interesting to have a platform to discuss challenges and identify solutions.”

Currently, five teachers out of 16 teachers (nine in primary and seven in secondary education) participate regularly in CoPs. But why do only five teachers participate?

“Some teachers, mainly the long serving ones have resisted and have not joined yet. They think they have enough experience, and therefore don’t need for CoP! They have not yet understood the relevance of CoPs, but I believe, step by step they will

We recorded some cases where parents responded positively by sending their children to school regularly."
Making the purpose of CoP session clear to members

I started by explaining the purpose of a CoP: identify teaching and learning issues we face as teachers, share experiences and propose possible solutions together. Using coaching and mentoring skills acquired from the training in Educational Mentorship and Coaching, I was able to help my colleagues about self-reflection, make them realise issues we face and plan actions to overcome them. When we tried out solutions and found it working my colleagues started appreciating our approach.

New school leader promised support to boosting CoPs

Mrs. Yankurije hopes that soon CoPs will run smoothly with the new head teacher’s support. “I discussed the issue with the head teacher and promised to support CoP by interesting all teachers, in addition to making it a requirement for every teacher. For instance, CoP is not part of the School Improvement Plan, but the new school leader who is already following VOB training in Effective School Leadership, supports the idea to include it next year. The head teacher support will obviously boost CoPs in our school and teacher participation will increase.”

Addressing students absenteeism through CoP

During the first CoP session, Mrs. Yankurije and her colleagues identified absenteeism as one of the priority issues—about 30 out 700 students would be absent every single day. Another issue was low level of English among teachers. Other issues identified during the first CoP session include insufficiency of teaching materials (books), limited ICT skills among teachers.

“After identifying a number of issues we highlighted those that are in our capacity as teachers,” she said.

Try-outs to address the challenges

The first try-out about students’ absenteeism was: making a follow up on every student who misses school three consecutive times. “Since all the five CoP members are class teachers the try-out was easier. They ask students about their colleagues who have been absent, write to their parents, or even call the parents when possible to find out why. We are still at this phase and it is promising. We recorded some cases where parents responded positively by sending their children to school regularly. Another try-out about students’ absenteeism was to initiate talent show in upper primary every Friday afternoon. We motivate students to present their talents on rotational basis, and realised that, on this day, the turn up increases—absenteeism reduces since some students cannot miss this small event! This is still a try-out we plan to discuss with the school leadership to spread it to the entire school.”

Regarding the issue of low levels of English language among teachers, they decided to organise a debate among CoP members every month to improve their level of English. “This try-out was successful but we found that the time is not enough. We will ask our head teacher to include this activity on continuous professional development programme for teachers so that we can engage other colleagues and make it more frequent.”
Alice Yankurije has been a teacher for the last five years. She currently teaches English at G.S Rukizi in Gicumbi District.

"Today I am so happy that I am a teacher, a profession I dreamt about since I was a child. I feel so happy when students call me teacher, when they come to me to ask questions. I am their friend, they're my friends. I don't greet them as my students! Instead of saying 'good morning students' I say 'good morning my friends'."

How did it start?

"One of my former teachers inspired me when I was in primary school. She was a young lady whom we lived at the same village and would gather children in the neighbourhood after class to teach us without expecting any payment from our parents. She had fallen in love with teaching, she loved and we loved her! I was always praying that I would become a teacher to help students like she was doing. She was the reason why I decided to go to a Teacher Training College to become a teacher. I taught for one year in primary education then pursued my studies to the University of Rwanda College of Education."

Students: Thank you for being our teacher

"When I meet some of my former students they always say 'thank you for being our teacher'. I am so proud to see students coming back to say thank you and I feel so uplifted when I receive such kind of feedback. One of my former students considers me as his mentor even when he is at university."
I teach to uplift students' knowledge, to help them help themselves in the future. When I teach I continuously upgrade my knowledge and also improve the way I teach.

Emilien Hakizimana, Gicumbi District.

Falling in love with teaching

Martin Habumugisha has 12 years in teaching profession. He is a former Biology and Chemistry teacher at Rusumo High School. Currently, he is the Acting Head Teacher at Technical and Vocational Education and Training school. In 2017 he was awarded as the best performing teacher in Eastern Province. He was given a cow (the most precious gift in Rwandan tradition), and a laptop with internet modem. Some of the criteria for selecting a best performing teacher include lesson plan preparation, scheme of work and pedagogical documents preparation, integration and use of ICT in teaching and learning, lesson delivery, innovation in education, among others.

I fell in love with teaching

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“I had never imagined that I could be a ‘good teacher’! I realised that students enjoyed my lessons and were growing in knowledge… I was making change beyond what I would expect. So, I thought of becoming a professional teacher and decided to pursue a post-graduate diploma in education which I completed in 2017.”

“I feel uplifted and encouraged to continue when I see my students progressing because of me. Some of my former students once invited me to a party. To my surprise, the party was for me! “We’re so grateful to you for being a great teacher to us. We are who we are because of you,” one student said to me. I was so touched, choosing the teaching career was a right choice,”

I was guided by the question, “how would I have gained knowledge without teachers?” This motivated me to become a teacher and use the knowledge I acquired from my own teachers so that the cycle doesn’t stop,”

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I teach because it’s the best way to prepare the next generation. The youth we have today we’ll be prepared to change our planet, our country and promote our culture. I like teaching because education is creating people with a growth mindset.

Fidèle Nshimiyimana, Nyamasheke District.

I’m a science teacher, my speciality is biology. I like to teach that subject because biology is our life. And then when I teach, I get to encourage learners about life, our planet and the environment.

Marie Jeanne Nyiramana, Nyamasheke District.

I teach to uplift students' knowledge, to help them help themselves in the future. When I teach I continuously upgrade my knowledge and also improve the way I teach.”

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Ready for a first CoP cycle?

Following the first steps of G.S. Nyamugali

By Ayaan Jama
Communication Officer, VVOB

The School-based Mentor at G.S. Nyamugali, Anastase Kamonyo, decided to focus the first CoP cycle on the languages department. He invited twelve teachers of the department to participate to this new continuous professional development activity.

First CoP session

During their first session, each member had the opportunity to share their challenges, and the team realised that they were all facing one big issue: “how to bring the learners at the center of the teaching process without any hard materials available?”

No books lead to the unavoidable use of the blackboard, no dictionaries lead to the students asking for ready-made solutions instead of learning how to find the answers by themselves, with all this leading to an active teacher and passive students.

The second challenge shared by most members was the learners’ resistance to speak English. Students are chatty, but when it comes to participating to an oral exercise in English it becomes impossible to make them talk. The challenge was clear: “how to motivate the students to participate in English oral exercises?”

The challenges to tackle were not easy, it was now time for an intensive brainstorming session to think about possible solutions and concrete actions that can be tried out in the school.

“After a long discussion, we decided on different activities we think can solve the challenges:

- We don’t have any dictionary right now, but most teachers have Smart phones. One try-out is about trying to use online dictionaries on the phone;
- Teachers don’t want to lose time writing everything on the blackboard. We will now try to print reading exercises;
- As an SBM, my role was to involve the school authorities to have at least one hard English dictionary per class;

As for our second challenge, we decided to organise a debate in English. We choose to do that because it was something we could promote as a fun activity happening outside the classroom, and we knew that all extra activities are always more motivating for the learners,” Mr. Kamonyo explained.

Participating in this Community of Practice inspired teachers to innovate and adapt diverse solutions, accelerating their individual and collective impact on the teaching and learning process. Teachers are now using Smart phones to access online dictionaries, the school authorities are actively looking into ways to equip all classrooms with a hard English dictionary and printing documents to allow teachers to easily give reading exercises as homework.

“The try-outs of this CoP also motivated the teachers to try new strategies to make the learners speak English. Although not all students took the floor, the debate was a great success! The students’ motivation was surprisingly high, and this boosted the teachers. In fact, they are already planning other debates and role plays.”

Some try-outs were delayed because of teachers’ busy schedule. Mr. Kamonyo reflected on it and decided that next time, he will arrange more follow-up to help the teachers and keep them focus on the objectives.
Mid CoP session

Good news for the team, all the activities tried out were successful. The group discussed what went well and how to consolidate the efforts.

The members realised that in order to permanently tackle the two challenges they worked on, they will have to integrate the try-outs activities into their lesson plan and commit to a continuous collective effort, even after the end of the CoP cycle.

“Thanks to CoP, we tried strategies to make the learners speak, and it worked! A teacher could only focus on giving their courses. But if there is no dialogue between the teachers and the students, it’s impossible to implement CBC. We, as teachers, need to give the children opportunities to think and deliver their thoughts. We have to teach them to share their ideas, to fight for their ideas and to use their brain to formulate them. The learners have to give their ideas and based on that, the teacher has to start building knowledge transfer. It’s our CoP sessions and our try-outs that reminded us to forget the old way of teaching; we are now on track and implementing CBC,” Mr. Hungurimana reflected.

Last CoP session

The very first CoP cycle at G.S. Nyamugali was about to be completed. The CoP members gathered for one last session to plan the dissemination of their results with the rest of the school.

“We decided to disseminate the results to our colleagues in the next school meeting. Those meetings are organised by the head teacher and gather all the teaching staff; it was a great opportunity for the CoP members to share our achievements, and for me as an SBM to use this success story to motivate the other teachers to take part in the next CoP cycle”, said Mr. Kamonyo.

The support of the head teacher regarding CPD activities is crucial. If teachers see that their head teacher is working hand in hand with the SBM, they will be more inclined to find time and actively invest in their continuous development. Presenting the CoP results in the school meeting was a success, as Mr. Kamonyo already managed to motivate a group of teachers to talk about a second CoP cycle.

Are you about to organise or participate to your first CoP cycle?

Here is some advice, shared by members of G.S. Nyamugali:

- As an SBM, if something is not clear in the theory of CoP, re-read your manual carefully. If it’s still not 100% clear, reach out to a fellow SBM or to your training facilitators. You have to start this cycle with a clear mind!

- Resource is a key element. But not only materials, humans too! Always keep good relationship with other people in your school.

- The previous point brings us to cooperation and collaboration: no body can achieve success alone. Collaborate with teachers and school leaders.

- Create time: one can always find time when it’s worth it. You won’t regret it.

- Don’t assume, stay curious: invest in your own curiosity to spark greater curiosity among your students.

- Don’t be scared to share and think outside the box: there’s no such thing as a bad idea.
Challeng in Teaching

Teached Shyaka, who is a new primary school teacher, has several male learners in his class who often disturb the lesson by misbehaving. These 6 male learners disturb the lessons by telling each other jokes and laughing out loud, they undermine group work assignments and physically harass other learners. Akimana has the same learners and also finds it difficult to deal with their behaviour in class.

In the previous CoP Session Shyaka, Akimana and their fellow CoP members analysed the challenge of how to effectively approach these students’ misbehaviour and came up with several possible solutions that the CoP members tried out. In today’s CoP session the CoP members share the experiences of the tried-out solutions.

We discussed that instead of punishing the misbehaving learners, Akimana and I should try to give them more positive attention.

Well, giving them more positive attention had an effect on their behaviour. They were calmer, paid more attention and didn’t disturb the class that much.

Nce, a successful solution then?

Mm, not quite. I was so focused on these 6 learners that I spent most of my energy on them and felt I forgot about all the other learners.

We agreed to experiment with placing them in the first row in class, staying close to them, making eye contact and giving them attention. So, I tried that in three of my lessons with them.

How did it go?
Did you have the same experience, Akynana?

Yes, I did. It worked for the 6 learners, but I noticed the other learners started talking more and some were no longer engaged with the lesson. I felt bad about that.

What methods can you use to engage the entire class but allows you to give some extra positive attention to those 6 learners?

Individual exercises, gallery walk, group work, organizing a debate, …

... group work, organizing a debate, ...

Individual exercises, gallery walk, ...

I like the idea of giving them group work, where I assign each of the 6 learners to a different group and ask them to lead the group work.

Sounds good! And to engage all the other learners you can have each group decide their group topic together, in agreement. What do you think?

Creative thinking! May I suggest trying it a couple of times because the learners are not familiar with gallery walks?

Thank you, Kamanzi, good reflection. I'll do at least two try-outs, one this week and one in two weeks.

I want to see if I can organize a gallery walk where I divide the class in pairs and give them an assignment to prepare for the gallery. I can then go from pair to pair to support and give some extra attention to the pairs with the 6 learners.

Okay, great cooperation here. Let's go to the second challenge on our agenda and discuss how the try-outs went for Kamanzi.
American former professional basketball player, Michael Jordan said, "Talent wins game, but teamwork and intelligence win championships". This quote demonstrates the power of collaboration, and it's what is happening in G.S. Kibilizi, in Gisagara District where the Community of Practice (CoP) is addressing the low performance of the students.

Jean Pierre Nsengiyumva, a well experienced teacher and a School Based Mentor (SBM) for almost four years has been leading and participating in community of practice activities at his school. He believes that one of the biggest challenges of his school was low performance of learners but the fruits are ready to be reaped thanks to CoP.

“As CoP members at G.S. Kibilizi, we realised that the problem in this school was low performance, and we all sat down to discuss on who has the key, we realised that us, teachers are on the front side to bring solutions," he said.

However, the issue of low performance cannot be solved by teachers only, parents' role is also needed. Parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home combined with parental involvement in schooling is critical to children's education.

“As CoP members together with the school leaders we discussed with parents committee, then during general assembly on how parents can support their children continue learning at home (revise lessons, do home works) because we believe that a parent is the first teacher," Mr. Nsengiyumva added.

Assessment is something not to be ignored in learning and teaching activities. The quality of assessment is one of the key features of good teaching. It is also important to use a variety of techniques for discovering what students have learned.

With that regards, CoP members from G.S. Kibilizi realised that there is a need to restructure the style of assessment given to the students given its role in improving performance.

“Issues of teaching timetable, and assessment were also other challenges in our school, but CoP members have changed the style of assessing our students, the necessary materials were bought such printer, papers to facilitate the new style." Nsengiyumva said.

CoP activities in G.S. Kibilizi could not have reached where it is now without the friendship spirit among the CoP members. Nsengiyumva said that every teacher in the school is interested in CoP activities, willing to participate heartedly and happy to share the same spirit. “However, having good relationship alone was not enough, we had to set the rules and assign every teacher the task to handle with regard to CoP facilitation, but everyone is free to express his/her concern," he said.

As much as we talk about CoP activities, teachers, students and students' performance, there is another crucial component: Leadership. Mr. Nsengiyumva testified that it is awesome to have a head teacher who supports CPD activities.

“We are lucky to be led by a head teacher who understands the importance of CoP .... She participates in CoP activities; she is passionate and supportive. She is the motivator to every member of our CoP,” he said.
Nsengiyumva says that the first CoP session was the right time for identification and ranking of the challenges which were mainly related to the low performance of learners, and assessment approach. The second CoP session was basically focusing on assigning each member a task to accomplish to address low performance of learners, and the final CoP session was about disseminating the good practices to all teaching staff.

“If you don’t know where you are coming from, you will never know where you are heading to; we did a reflection, and we hope that all challenges are going to be addressed, thanks to CoP as we wait for National Examinations,” he added.

The impact of CoP at G.S. Kibilizi was the result of good school leadership, collaboration and sharing of responsibilities.

Research indicates that shared leadership involves maximizing all of the human resources in an organisation by empowering individuals and giving them an opportunity to take leadership positions in their areas of expertise.

In this regard, Mr. Nsengiyumva recommends other School Based Mentors not to own responsibilities, rather share them with other CoP members. “Please do not think that you can do it on your own, work with others,” he said.

Effective classroom management is key to success: teachers are able to handle students, thanks to CoP

Cedric Gikundiro, a teacher of chemistry with teaching experience of six years participates in CoP at his school. As a result of participating in CoP, he has learnt how to better manage a classroom. “Through CoP activities I have gained more skills, I learnt how to work with my colleagues, we all motivate each other so that we can increase the rate of students’ performance in this school,” he said.

It is known that all students are special in their own way and have their strength and weaknesses. If a student is not performing very well, it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to support him/her but teachers should know how to detect learners' problem.

According to Gikundiro: “Before, I didn’t know how to support slow learners. But thanks to the CoP, I have learnt how to support and encourage them by using different techniques,” he said.

It is believed that a confident teacher can impact his/her students positively in many aspect of learning. And CoP activities help to nurture that teacher’s confidence.

For Mr. Gikundiro the confidence of teachers is being boosted. “Collaboration is good, I have gained confidence from CoP,” he added.

Anysie Mukamwiza is a teacher of Kinyarwanda at G.S. Kibilizi. She believes that none is expert, but through CoP, lesson planning issues were solved. “We have been helping one another on how to prepare a lesson plan. We were reminded that a class does not start when you’re teaching, it starts when you are in preparing a lesson”.

Mrs. Mukamwiza adds that CoP has improved the relationship between teachers and students as well as students’ participation. “We now discuss with our students on what could be the best way to learn. We believe the results in National Examinations will be amazing.” she noted.

Mr. Gikundiro and Mrs. Mukamwiza advise other teachers from different schools to work together as a team.
Community of Practice cannot be organised in the most efficient way without the full support of the school management. After meeting different Head Teachers and discussing on their role regarding CPD activities, the conclusion was clear: school leaders have to focus more on stimulating and sustaining communities of practice as well as supporting their SBM.

**The importance of CPD**

Jean Bosco Manzi Dusabe, the Head Teacher of G.S. Cyabayaga in Nyagatare was trained in Effective School Leadership offered by the University of Rwanda College of Education with VVOB’s support. Mr. Dusabe understands the importance of school-based continuous professional development (CPD) and supports CoPs in his school. According to him, CoP helps teachers with teaching difficulties and challenges them to learn from each other.

He also noted that CoP help teachers to share experiences and find practical solutions to different problems. “We will continue to support CPD activities, CoPs in particular, as they help to increase teachers’ competencies to deal with educational challenges while improving learning outcomes -our ultimate goal”.

**CoP to achieve better outcomes**

According to the Head Teacher Félicité Mukeshimana, G.S. Kibilizi, CoP is a very important activity as it is helping the school to overcome different challenges. “I am very confident that CoPs will continue to help our ways towards the right outcomes (results from National Examinations). Look, due to the impact of CoP, teachers are able to discuss their challenges from their respective departments, in the end they do have common understanding on how they can overcome those challenges through the sense of ownership; and it was not the case before!” she said.

Mrs. Mukeshimana also mentioned that with the support of CoP, the teaching methods of science subjects and English subject are now on another level. “In science subjects we are doing well just because teachers have learnt how to use innovation through the creation of teaching aids suitable to the daily environment of students. English language course in primary level was not being taught as we expected, but since the beginning of CoP in this school everything is back to its standard,” she underlined.

“Even though CoP activities are contributing to the improvement of learners in our school, there are still many challenges that can hinder the CoP meetings. I will continue to do my best to support my SBM and the teaching staff to keep moving in the right direction,” concluded Mrs. Mukeshimana.

Corneille Ntare is the Head Teacher of G.S. Nyamugali located in Nyamasheke District. According to him, CPD activities are crucial for the development of a school. It’s the effective way to motivate teachers to improve their teaching skills, problem solving skills and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing.

**CoP to make the community grow**

G.S. Nyamugali is part of different CPD training programmes offered by the University of Rwanda College of Education with VVOB’s support. “We have different post-training programmes offered to our teachers, but not all our members got one. Teachers who were trained always come back with new ideas and know how they can be applied practical life in teaching. They also share everything with their colleagues,” added Mr Ntare.

Mr Ntare concluded with an inspiring quote: “If we plant the right seeds today, tomorrow will be better.”
CoP practical exercise

For the school Leader

By the end of this school year your teachers have completed at least one cycle in their Community of Practice. They analysed challenges they have in teaching and learning, discussed possible solutions to these challenges, tried them out, learned lessons from these try-outs and shared them with all teachers in your school.

We invite you to stand still and reflect on the impact of this Community of Practice in your school. Note down on each continuum where you feel your school stands.

**How has the Community of Practice impacted...?**

1. **the cooperation and relationship between your teachers**
   “teachers trust and respect each other more, work better together as a team”
   
   disagree
   agree

2. **the mindset/attitude of your teachers**
   “teachers are more open to share their challenges and learn together and from each other”
   
   disagree
   agree

3. **the teachers’ ability to reflect and find solutions**
   “teachers are more critical in analysing their challenges, discussing possible ways forward and finding effective solutions”
   
   disagree
   agree

4. **the teachers’ responsibility and personal leadership**
   “teachers take more personal and collective responsibility and lead each other in turn”
   
   disagree
   agree

After you noted down your perceptions, we invite you to have a talk with your teachers to understand if they have the same perception. Discuss together how you can make the Communities of Practice in your school even more impactful.

Good luck!
TIPS FOR AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

For Teachers

TWO CHALLENGES PER CoP CYCLE

- Define maximum challenges for one CoP cycle;
- Go through a whole cycle working on those same challenges, that’s minimum three sessions addressing the same challenges.

SHARE RESPONSIBILITIES

- Share responsibilities between the CoP members;
- Involve everyone;
- Rotate the facilitator role, it is not a role for the SBM/SSL only;
- Appoint one member to be responsible for each try-out;
- Set deadlines.

COLLABORATE & RESPECT

- Share your challenges with your colleagues;
- Respect the views of other members;
- Maintain a good working atmosphere.

For SBMs and SSLs

PLAN

- Write a CPD plan and share it with your HT;
- Hang your plan in the staff room.

INVEST

- Make time to invest in your continuous professional development;
- Stay curious, always try to learn new things.

INOLVE YOUR HT/ DHT

- Involve the school management;
- Invite them to attend some CoP sessions;
- Regularly share the progress with them, trough formal and informal reporting.

BE PREPARED

- Understand the difference between a CoP cycle and CoP sessions;
- During the first CoP session, explain the purpose, focus, importance and expectations of a CoP;
- Reflect on each CoP session with the members to make the next session even better.

CREATE A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- Establish good relationships with teachers;
- Don’t take the lead on everything, share responsibilities with your CoP members;
- Follow the evolution of the teachers and give them feedback.

DISSEMINATE

Don’t forget to collect evidence of successes in order to disseminate those best practices to other teachers and schools.

For Head Teachers

BE INVOLVED

- Take time to participate in CPD activities;
- Be a positive added value;

SUPPORT

- CoP is a place to support, not a place to evaluate;
- Your support will encourage teachers and increase their participation in CPD;
- Provide teachers, SBMs and SSLs sufficient time for CPD.

WORK ON THE RESULTS

- Help your SBM/SSL and CoP members disseminate their results;
- Give the opportunity to your SBM/SSL to share positive results in pedagogical meetings.

BE MOTIVATE

- Motivating the teachers is sometimes beyond the SBM/SSL control, help him/her.
Professional Standards for Effective School Leadership in Rwanda

School leaders play a vital role in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning. REB in collaboration with VVOB developed five Professional Standards for Effective School Leadership describing the main competences that you, as a head teacher or deputy head teacher, has to put into practice:

1. **Involve your school community and stakeholders in setting a shared school vision and mission;**

2. **Ensure that teachers have the opportunity for effective teaching and learning;**
   - Continuously improve the process to enhance the level of instruction for all students.

3. **Support teachers through effective feedback on their teaching and professional development;**
   - Ensure that teaching and learning experiences meet the needs of all students and are in line with CBC.

4. **Manage the organisation, operations, and facilities in ways that maximise the use of resources;**
   - Promote a safe, efficient, legal, and effective learning environment.

5. **Practice two-way communication and use appropriate oral, written, and electronic communication and collaboration skills to accomplish school and system goals;**
   - Build and maintain relationships with students, teachers, parents, and community.
VVOB - education for development has been operating in Rwanda since 2003. Currently, VVOB is implementing a multi-year programme, Leading, Teaching and Learning Together-LTLT (2017-2021), that targets capacity development of key stakeholders or “frontline agents” in the basic education system in Rwanda, i.e. school leaders and teachers.

In partnership with the Mastercard Foundation through Leaders in Teaching, at the secondary school level, and the University of Rwanda – College of Education and Rwanda Education Board, VVOB offers relevant certificate and diploma courses to primary and secondary school leaders, sector education inspectors, mentor teachers and science teachers to improve educational services in primary and secondary schools in 17 districts.

- A diploma course in Effective School Leadership equips Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers with the competences to fulfil their roles as school leaders.
- A certificate course in Educational Mentorship and Coaching provides School Based Mentors and School Subject Leaders in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) with effective tools and skills to facilitate professional development activities in schools.
- At the same time a certificate course in Educational Mentorship and Coaching is also offered to Sector Education Officers to equip them with the competences to coach school leaders effectively, and to initiate and sustain professional learning communities of school leaders.

The ultimate goal is improve learning outcomes in basic education through improved school leadership and teaching so young people have opportunities to find work or create their own.

So far:

- 51 Teacher Training College tutors attended a CPD certificate course in EMC.
- 190 Sector Education Officers were trained in Educational Mentorship and Coaching.
- 550 school leaders completed a CPD diploma course in Effective School Leadership, while more than 400 school leaders are undergoing the same programme.
- About 900 school-based mentors and more than 900 STEM teachers completed a CPD in Educational Mentorship and Coaching.

More than 1,400 in-service teachers and school leaders that completed the first of the three planned cohorts of the CPD certificate and diploma courses graduated in November 2019. They included Head Teachers, Deputy Head Teachers, Sector Education Officers, TTC Tutors, School Based Mentors, and School Subject Leaders for STEM.

- By 2021, a total of approximately 1,300 primary and secondary schools will benefit from the CPD training programmes.
- About 2,000 school leaders are expected to benefit from the diploma course in Effective School Leadership.
- About 3,000 teachers including STEM teachers will have completed a certificate course in Educational Mentorship and Coaching.

You can learn more about VVOB-URCE CPD programmes at http://rwanda.vvob.org
What people say about VVOB CPD programmes

Undoubtedly, the training opened up my mind. I would rarely conduct class visits, and when I did go, I would not inform teachers. My intention was to criticise and give instructions. I thought that assessing what happens in a class was the responsibility of the deputy head teacher in charge of studies. Today, I conduct lesson observations and inform with the concerned teachers about what I would like to evaluate. I give constructive feedback—appreciating what goes well and advise on areas of improvement afterwards. I now visit at least three teachers every week."

Janvier Ntakirutimana, Head Teacher, Munyaga Secondary school, Rwamagana District.

When I participated in the certificate course in Educational Mentorship and Coaching, I realised that my colleagues at my school and I needed to change our perceptions. I learnt that supporting one another is everyone’s responsibility if learning outcomes are to be improved."

Eugenie Kangore, Chemistry Subject Leader at G.S Rwamagana Protestant, Rwamagana District.

Even though I had been leading the school for a while already, I had never been trained in doing so. I am definitely more organised now, and have been incorporating some crucial aspects of school leadership in my daily work."

Father Harerimana, Head Teacher at G.S Nyarubuye, Gatsibo District.

You can also share your experience with regard to the CPD programmes offered by UR-CE with VVOB support. Send us your short testimony @ vvobrwandaorg@gmail.com.