URUNANA RW’ABAREZI
peer learning for school leaders

ISSUE 001 JULY 2015
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Urunana rw’Abarezi is free of charge and is published on a quarterly basis. It is also available to download online: www.vvobrwanda.org/content/plnmag

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the very first issue of Urunana rw’Abarezi, our magazine on Professional Learning Networks for Head Teachers. We at the Rwanda Education Board are pleased to share – here and in future - all there is to learn from our project that promotes peer learning at Sector level in the aim of improving the school leadership competences of Head Teachers.

The project is part of the Ministry of Education’s continued partnership with the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB), a relationship that dates back to 2003. For 2014-2016, the Association’s team of education experts has assisted the Rwanda Education Board and the University of Rwanda - College of Education develop a joint programme that offers a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to improving literacy, numeracy and life skills. The programme focuses on Learning Outcomes in Primary Education.

Promoting Professional Learning Networks is one of the ways the programme intends to ensure the highest level of School Leadership and effectiveness in teaching. A year ago, VVOB and REB began training one Sector Education Officer from every District in coaching Professional Learning Networks. Since then, under the guidance of these 30 SEOs, the first Professional Learning Networks have become operational.

We are learning and recording a great deal of information from these on how Head Teachers can learn from one another within Sector level networks. And in August, we are planning to expand this project to 90 new Sectors to ensure that more Head Teachers are given the opportunity to share knowledge and best practices as they strive to improve the quality of education in their schools.

This magazine offers an overview of the background of this project and insights into its implementation. You will also find here articles from Sector Education Officers, Head Teachers and other stakeholders that are involved. Our goal is to turn this magazine into an open space for you to share and discuss the challenges you’ve faced and potential solutions you’ve found in your pursuit of excellence in Education.

Here at REB, we are proud of what we have achieved so far, and we look forward to even greater successes as we work together. We hope that you will enjoy reading this magazine. But even more than that, we hope you will contribute to this platform for Professional Learning Networks and participate in it by sharing your valuable experiences.

Sincerely,

GASANA Janvier
REB Director General
In 30 sectors across our country, Sector Education Officers have established Professional Learning Networks as part of a peer learning process among Head Teachers. The purpose: to learn from one another by sharing knowledge and experiences.

It is well known that ideas aren’t like money. When you and I exchange the same amount of amafaranga, nothing changes. I’m not any richer or poorer, and neither are you. But when we share our ideas, you gain from my ideas while also keeping your own. And so do I. We are both enriched by the experience.

So we warmly invite you all to share all of this by sending them to plnrwanda@gmail.com.

In this first issue, we’ve strived to provide some background on the concept of Professional Learning Networks and to share the observations of some of the first individuals to be involved and participating. You will therefore find in this issue, background articles on “PLNs: what, why and how?”, “Key Enablers for effective PLNs”, “Collaboration and collective responsibility among School Leaders”, “Peer learning school visits”, and “Peer learning and gender”.

Share your thoughts and experiences with us. Write to plnrwanda@gmail.com.

It is in this spirit of sharing that this magazine is written. We want to share with you what is being learned in Professional Learning Networks. And we want to encourage you to use this magazine to share your experiences in the field of education with other readers. In the next issues, we will dedicate a section for reader feedback, to help us capture your reactions on the articles, to spark constructive discussions, and to hear about your challenges and/or best practices.

The magazine also features stories from SEOs and Head Teachers that share their perspectives and experiences with regard to their involvement with PLNs.

We sincerely hope you enjoy this magazine and that you will draw something from it. We would also love to hear from you.
WORKING IN PLNs: WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS
WHAT, WHY AND HOW?

It is said that the many are often smarter than the few. If that’s true there is then probably a need to bring the few together to become many. The underlying assumption of course is that one must be smarter to become better, that is to improve one’s performance.

When people come together there is an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning. The following are traits of peer-to-peer learning:

- It spreads information through formal or informal social networks;
- It involves two-way (or more) communication;
- It recognizes that every participant can be a teacher and a learner;
- It is community- and participant-driven; and
- It can occur through either an ongoing forum or one-time exchange.

‘Professional peers’ are persons who have the same abilities, qualifications, professional background, and status. Therefore, Head Teachers are a good example of professional peers.

As we reflect on what a Professional Learning Network is, we could say that it is a group of ‘professional peers’ that intentionally organizes opportunities to share their knowledge and experience in order to learn together and from one another with the aim of becoming better professionals.

The power of a Professional Learning Network lies in group members sharing their knowledge and experiences.
They engage together in challenges of practice in order to have a deeper and more unified understanding of those challenges. Proposed solutions emerge from their investigations and best practices exchanges. These solutions are then tried in their own daily experience in order to test their efficiency.

People are more likely to hear and internalize messages that can influence their attitudes and behaviours when they believe the messenger understands their concerns and pressures. Peer learning is effective because:

- Peers understand the goals, issues, and pressures that colleagues face;
- Peers have direct experience regarding the field they are working in;
- Peers are seen as credible, unbiased, and trusted sources of information;
- Peers speak the same language and can help each other distil information to the critical pieces needed to make a decision;
- Peers are easy to contact when important decisions need to be made.

We know that the quality of school leadership is second only to the quality of classroom instruction on impacting students’ learning achievement. So working on the improvement of school leadership performance could contribute to the enhancement of students’ learning outcomes. Bringing Head Teachers together in a structural and systemic way to learn together and to learn from one another is done to establish PLNs of Head Teachers in order to improve learning achievement of students.

Based on the fact that SEOs are the most appropriate agents to lead PLNs at Sector level, in a pilot phase one SEO per Sector was trained on how to lead PLNs in an effective way. They gained insight on the latest knowledge about effective school leadership and effective PLNs. After that, they were trained to lead and coach the desired networks. Following the initial training, SEOs established the first 30 PLNs that are now operational. In a second phase, another 90 SEOs will be trained and they will be starting up the next 90 PLNs. Meanwhile, PLN sessions will be visited in order to provide SEOs with feedback on their performance. In order to support the functioning of the PLNs the Head Teachers participating in the PLNs will be facilitated in how to organize peer reviews of their respective schools. Peer review outcomes can be used as a basis for further sharing of knowledge and best practices.

This magazine is developed and will be disseminated among SEOs and all primary school Head Teachers with the intention to create a platform for sharing experiences from PLNs and to document best practices.

Also a ‘scale up event’ is organized to share the pilot experiences with the methodology of ‘peer learning’ with all stakeholders.

The whole process will be monitored and evaluated and the outcomes will be used to refine the process. Recommendations coming from this continuous M&E process will also be used for the scale up process.

In this way PLNs provides a structure for Continuous Professional Development for Head Teachers based on the old wisdom that the true strength of any learning process lies in the collaboration of learners rather than in the knowledge of one expert.
PLNs: OFFERING A BETTER PERSPECTIVE

Following his graduation from the former Kigali Institute of Education (KIE), Deogratias Uwimana made his first steps in the Education arena as the acting Education Officer of Gicumbi District before he was appointed four years ago the Sector Education Officer (SEO) of Kageyo, a Sector with a native population of 18,000, and 7 schools.

This middle-aged father of two quickly found himself immersed in school-life realities such as leadership and management, teachers’ recruitment and empowerment, students’ enrolment and community sensitization. He also had to learn to overcome challenges set by the traditional leadership models found in many schools, the absence of proactivity from some Head Teachers, and the lack of engagement from the community.

PLNs, a better perspective

As one of the SEOs who were privileged to participate in the first Professional Learning Network (PLN) workshop for Head Teachers, Deogratias shared his overwhelming perspective about this innovative peer learning approach.

In an interview carried out in June 2015, Deogratias described his school management attitude prior to attending PLNs.

“Before I got trained in how to facilitate PLNs, said Deogratias, I had a self-centered leadership approach. I thought that school leaders knew everything and that they were to solve all problems”.

But his involvement with the PLNs helped him earn a balanced perspective on school leadership and management: “I discovered that PLNs are the best places to encourage Head Teachers to better lead their people and manage their schools” he said. “PLNs are the right forums for transferring basic knowledge on how to deal with challenging school issues like dropouts, school feeding, Continuous Professional Development, and many more”.

UWIMANA Deogratias
**Fleshing it out**

Having an accurate awareness of the schools’ needs, Deogratias was amazed at how these learning networks can be bumping spaces for sharing best practices among Head Teachers:

“From the PLN workshops I attended, I learned the different dimensions of school leadership. I realized that most schools did not have any stated vision. This is a considerable hindrance to their development and progress”, tells the experienced sector educator. “I also learned the importance of encouraging the development of reliable school management structures rather than depending on individual leaders”.

The active involvement of the community in the school management is also an indispensable component that is reaffirmed and better understood through a consistent sharing of experience among peers.

“The best ways of engaging community actors like parents, midugudu leaders, religious leaders, and local associations are openly shared and discussed among schools leaders in the PLNs. This has not been easily done before”.

Deogratias also noted the catalytic role of PLNs in helping school leaders prepare and chair schools meetings efficiently:

“The PLNs were real eye openers with respect to our perception of the role of the school leader in a meeting. Prior to that, I have always believed that the leader was the chief, the only person to provide solutions to problems of the schools. I viewed school leaders as preachers who had to tell others what ought to be done. Today, my perspective has changed. The role of a school leader is to help others find relevant solutions to problems in the right context. The leader should foster a participative problem-solving approach by encouraging and valuing everyone’s potential.”

**Bringing it home**

When asked to tell the main things learned that can be helpful in successfully facilitating a PLN session, some best practices like school walks and school visits were suggested.

“School walks mean I get to know the person first. There is no way I can be helpful to a school leader unless I understand the leader and his or her working environment.”

More particularly, Deogratias praised the PLNs Workshop pedagogical approaches like drama and real-time meeting facilitation exercises organized in school visits.

A key aspect stressed by Deogratias is the complementary learning that is made possible by the PLNs. “My participation in the PLN workshops, said Deogratias, helped me understand that each one of us is gifted with different skills. We can complement each other by using our different areas of expertise towards the good of our students. Therefore the role of the leader is to coach and to connect talented people. If attended accordingly, PLNs can help young leaders learn from the experience of their peers. Most challenges can be overcome by learning from the failures and the successes of others”.

In view of the upcoming Workshop opportunities, Deogratias calls his colleagues to be “wholeheartedly engaged”. “Any lasting learning goes with a genuine commitment from the heart, he insisted. It is important to set goals, to be determined to practice what is learned and to assess the progress made.”

“I really hope that key partners like VVOB and Local Government actors like Executive Secretaries will continue to support these learning and mentorship spaces. A well-managed school can be like paradise!” he said.
Collaboration and collective responsibility among school leaders is an important aspect in developing the capacity of school leaders to effectively carry out their managerial and leadership duties and ensuring effective learning for every student in a particular school. This effort involves engaging in joint decision making, being willing to share acquired experience over time, opening one’s school to observation to create space for constructive critique by peers and taking collective responsibility for student learning in schools. Without collaboration among school leaders, knowledge, skills and best practices in education remain with individuals, while they should be made available to others for collective benefit.

According to the modern thinking, knowledge is no longer perceived to be a finite object found in books or stored within certain individuals. Instead, it is believed to emerge from conversations, discussions and exchange of ideas, where knowledge creation and development starts with the process of exchanging informal, tacit knowledge through shared experiences in a day-to-day social interaction. Through the dialogue of educators, constructive contradictions are given a safe space to be made explicit and in the process, knowledge is created. With collaboration this knowledge is not only made available to those who may need it for improving their own professional practice, but it is also confirmed or adequately corrected in the process of discussion for appropriateness of use. Thus collaborative teams act as a social system of knowledge production and exchange, with the objective of looking for ways to improve professionally.

Collective responsibility for student learning

This is a collective focus by school leaders, in close collaboration with other education stakeholders, on student learning as contrasted with isolated, individual improvement. It compels educators, including school leaders, teachers, support staff, parents and policy makers, to set challenging learning goals for student learning and to work in partnership for their realization. It calls for commitment to providing needed support to children that are struggling in school, in a family or in a class. Education systems where educators take this collective
Peer and reciprocal accountability rather than administrative accountability encourages commitment from those responsible for the education of children: for instance a successful school leader with a sense of collective responsibility does not watch another one fail with bystander apathy. Instead they support their colleagues and work with them to figure out the reasons for failure. They creatively and innovatively find solutions that lead to improvement.

**Why should educators in particular and society at large assume collective responsibility for high levels of learning for all students?**

Providing adequate education for all is the very definition of educational system success and is a moral imperative. Equity in education is a priority goal for our country because it is expected to generate economic returns in the long run to individuals, society and the entire country.

As an example, well-educated doctors contribute to saving on the cost of seeking expensive medical care from abroad. Well-trained engineers would build strong, reliable and affordable housing and even export their skills to other countries, especially with the ongoing regional integration. Graduates of our schools would be the preferred choice of employers globally owing to their superior competences. We would have highly ethical leaders and civil servants who serve the public responsibly and respectfully. Our country would, as a result, be developed, peaceful and prosperous.

On the other hand, poor quality education would have disastrous consequences for individuals, society and the country, particularly in a knowledge-based economy that Rwanda is gradually gearing toward. Technology is leading to machines replacing people engaged in routine work, making them jobless. So they earn no income, go hungry and sick, pay no tax and become a burden to the tax payers; they swell the numbers of criminals, call for large numbers of policemen, and cram prisons. This latter situation is the last thing any country or society would want to be identified with. Hence the need to collaboratively and collectively make a joint effort to provide the best education to our children.

*Rukyeba Eugene is the director of the school management and leadership unit within the Teacher Development and Management Department at REB.*
For the past two years, Cecile Ntakirutimana has been serving as the Sector Education Officer for Gataraga Sector. Though relatively new to education – she graduated from the Kigali Institute of Education just 3 years ago with a degree in Business and Economics in Education – she confesses a great passion for her chosen field. “Being directly involved in the education sector has considerably opened my eyes to many realities that were unknown to me for years”, notes the one time school teacher as she summarizes her educational experience from the last three years.

**Tough beginnings**

“My beginnings were not really easy. Before I started working as SEO in Gataraga, there was no permanent staff solely responsible for Education files. There was only one person, who wore various hats (health, social, nutrition, hygiene, etc…) at the same time. So the new role that I was to play was not well understood. And I faced resistance from colleagues, schools leaders and the community. And despite my Educational training, I had no idea of the real issues and challenges Head Teachers and Teachers or other Education stakeholders were facing daily. I knew the theory, National agendas and targets, but I needed to experience a different practical dimension from the field”, the attractive educator revealed with enthusiasm.

Cecile explained how she learned to determine school needs: “I had to listen to Head Teachers and to understand the challenges they face in school management every day. I had to put myself in teachers’ shoes to understand the obstacles they face, their fears, their frustrations and their hopes!”

Issues related to Head Teachers’ and Teachers’ empowerment, parents’ involvement and collaboration, and student learning were among key areas she had to get a handle on as Sector Education Officer. “But in order to be successful, she added, we had to work as a team. We had to collaborate and to learn from each other”.

**PLNs contributions**

Cecile recalls a time when bringing different Head Teachers to sit around a table in order to find common ground, was painful and extremely challenging: “I remember the reactions of Head Teachers and Teachers when I used to call them for a meeting.”
There was considerable resistance and they responded negatively most of the time. And when they physically attended my meetings, I had the impression that they wanted to tear me to pieces!” she laughs. “It was like all they wanted was to disagree with me. So I had to find ways for us to work as a team; to make sure that I minimize the resistance from the people I work with.”

This is one of the main reasons Cecile is very supportive of the Professional Learning Network (PLN) learning model.

“The 4 PLN workshops from VVOB that I attended were very consistent and helpful. We gained new insights into School Management Standards. We also learned about Key enablers to be successful. Some of those keys are about having purpose and focus, building strong relationships, fostering good collaboration, strengthening effective leadership, and encouraging accountability”, she explained.

Cecile shows her amazement at how Peer Learning builds confidence in school leaders: “We learned from PLN Workshops that as SEOs, we should never view ourselves as faultfinders or inspectors or police officers. We are coaches and facilitators. We do not impose our ideas but we connect talented School Leaders so that they can find solutions that are relevant to their contexts”, she insisted.

**Future opportunities**

“The PLN learning model will help Head Teachers identify and acknowledge their weaknesses and limitations as they meet with their peers. This cannot be easily done in a traditional way of doing things. PLNs also encourage Head Teachers to be eager to learn more from each other”, she continued.

In implementing the lessons learned from the workshops, Cecile was very impressed about how PLNs can be powerful tools in helping school leaders articulate solutions to their problems in a practical way: “I noticed that some of the recurrent topics we have been trying to address using the old traditional learning model were approached efficiently through PLNs sessions and meetings. Issues like school feeding, school sports, dropouts, school performance, and parental involvement got appropriate responses from the collective wisdom and the sharing of experience from Head Teachers”, she revealed.

Cecile also refutes the popular assumption that “we learn from experts only”.

“This attitude is poor and irrelevant. I saw from experience that peer learning can be a powerful learning method if used accordingly and consistently” she observed.

“However, it is always important to avoid routine and to encourage creative thinking in PLNs sessions. Thinking outside the box is a must”, she warned. “The danger of doing things in a repetitive way should never be neglected”.

She concluded with these recommendations for other SEOs and for the organisers as well: “SEO are catalysts. So I really encourage my fellow SEOs to massively attend these workshops and programmes. I also hope that more exercises in Workshops and more schools visits will be organized to help participants better grasp the theories.”
The last time I visited a peer learning session, a colleague of mine was explaining how he introduced cooperative learning: “all the pupils work together” he said, “and the teacher doesn’t do all the teaching herself anymore”. He told of how “the cleverest pupils were helping others” and “in all groups we put pupils of all levels”. He was claiming to have solved a lot of problems and that all the students had improved their learning results.

To be honest, I couldn’t quite believe what he was telling us. Or, to put it differently, I could not understand what he was telling us and I found it difficult to imagine what he described. A teacher who delegates the teaching role to her pupils? Pupils explaining to their classmates what they didn’t understand? Working in so many different groups? To me, this was probably just a serious undisciplined mess. I kept asking questions, but his answers kept me unconvinced. It’s not that I didn’t trust him, but I just couldn’t picture it. And I was not the only one.

Fortunately, our SEO realised what was happening. “Your colleague is sharing his best practices with us” he said, “and we cannot grasp the full meaning of what he is telling us. So what are we going to do about it?” We decided that there was only one possible way to get a better understanding of what was going on at the school. So we planned for a visit.

But first we had to prepare our visit accordingly. What did we really want to learn? Did we want to talk with teachers? Did we want to talk with pupils as well? And what were the questions that we wanted to ask them? Did we also want to have solid evidence of improvements in pupil learning achievements? And were we to visit classrooms as well? And if so, were we to do this with the whole group or just in pairs?

We also decided that at the end of the visit we would meet again and assess our findings for further reflection. We wanted to merge our experiences from this visit and to draw conclusions based on the lessons learned. And we even considered that it might be useful to share our experiences with our fellow head teacher and to give him our conclusions and recommendations.

This was how we went about our first peer learning school visit. And we all learned much from it. For instance, we learned about the teaching methodology that was used. We recognized that it wasn’t a solution for all possible problems. But we also noted that it could work very well in certain circumstances. You had to look critically to know when it was appropriate.

But what we also learned was that you cannot learn everything just by talking to each other, even when asking the right questions. Every now and then, it is very good to go and visit each other’s school to see ideas in action. Then what was said can be understood in a deeper way especially when you go prepared. You have to be clear on what you want to know. You have to focus on that to be able to ask the right questions, to look at the right places, to interpret what you have seen and heard in the right way. And then you need to share your interpretations again in order to fine-tune them and to come to deeper understanding. It is like with music. Nobody can tell you how beautiful a
song is. You have to hear the music and maybe even to dance to it to get a sense of its beauty. Peer learning by visiting the schools of your fellow school leaders can be like dancing to the rhythm of a new song. And the wonderful thing about it is that it gives a great opportunity to learn from each other.

Should you plan to visit neighboring schools, the following procedure may be helpful in making the most of your peer learning school visit.

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<th>STAGES</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BEFORE THE VISIT</strong></td>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td>Why do you choose to visit this particular school?</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Objective</strong></td>
<td>What do you want to see, investigate, learn?</td>
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<td><strong>Expected result</strong></td>
<td>What do you expect to learn from this visit?</td>
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<td><strong>Preparation of questions of interviews, plan the areas to be emphasised.</strong></td>
<td>Who do want to talk with? What are the questions you want to ask? What are the actions / practices you want to see? Etc.</td>
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<td><strong>Divide roles in your team for the visit.</strong></td>
<td>Who will report on what after visiting? Who will focus on what area of attention? Who is (are) leading the (sub) teams? Who will chair the evaluation at the end of the visit? Etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DURING THE VISIT</strong></td>
<td><strong>Preparation of logistics</strong></td>
<td>Who is (are) responsible for needed logistics?</td>
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<td><strong>Exploration of practices</strong></td>
<td>Try not to disturb practices. Make yourself ‘invisible’ in order not to change a practice by your presence.</td>
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<td><strong>Peer exchange session</strong></td>
<td>Reflect upon the questions like: What was it you expected to see and what did you see? How do you interpret what you have seen? Did we all see the same? What can we learn from what we have seen? What are recommendations for both the visitors and the school visited?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AFTER THE VISIT</strong></td>
<td><strong>Report of the visit</strong></td>
<td>Formulate a brief report on what was seen, learnt, concluded and recommended. Use it as input for your next PLN meeting.</td>
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THE POWER OF PLNs

Br. Camille Rudasingwa joined the Josephites Brotherhood in 1986. But it wasn’t until 1998 that he was appointed Principal of Groupe Scolaire Saint Aloys, a boarding school located in the District of Rwamagana with 1,045 students, boys and girls included.

Since then, Br. Camille has been passionately leading this school rated in Rwamagana District school of reference and school of excellence by the Rwanda Education Board and VVOB respectively, despite the various range of challenges he had to face to make sure that Quality Education is not compromised.

Years of Scarcity

Br. Camille gives a quick description of Group Scolaire St Aloys four years after the Genocide: “There were many considerable challenges when I started leading our School almost two decades ago. The school was not gender inclusive since girls had to live outside the boarding school. Only boys could stay. Also, the discipline at the school was not commendable at all. So we had to make sure the school administration grabbed control of the situation.

“Teachers needed to be reassured that their role is very valuable. So building their capacities was not an option for us. Ten years on, we can say with a great deal of confidence that our teachers are stable, confident and very competent. When a teacher leaves our school, it is either for personal reasons or because of a promotion”, said Br. Camille.

But quality of education and learning were also serious challenges the school had to deal with during this period: “Our students had to be competitive rather than being average students. So teachers had to be trained and empowered to be able to transfer the knowledge from the curriculum in a qualitative and holistic way. We are very pleased with the noticeable progress we have achieved as a school along with the community, particularly parents who have been supportive over these past years”.

The Power of PLNs

“One of the ways to try to foster learning and collaboration among various education actors in Rwamagana, explained Br. Camille, has been Head Teachers networking. We wanted to make sure that Head Teachers are able to help each other with regard to key school management issues through peer learning and sharing.

However, the attempt to bring together like-minded Head Teachers to have learning conversations did not succeed at that time: “There were continuous leadership changes at both schools and local government levels. These frequent permutations stalled our initiative to build Head Teachers networks and the momentum was lost”.

RUDASINGWA Camille
“I warmly welcome the recent school visits and meetings between Head Teachers under the leadership of Sector Education Officers who have recently been trained in how to facilitate Professional Learning Networks (PLNs)” said the Josephite brother.

Br. Camille is a strong believer of peer learning as a way to improve Head Teachers leadership skills: “The possibility of sharing experiences through PLNs can lead Head Teachers to collectively reflect on lasting solutions to the various school problems they regularly face as leaders. Topics related to human resource management, school management, and students learning, are deeply discussed when they are dealt with as a team of leaders.”

**Future perspectives**

Br. Camille shared his optimism in the potential that comes with Head teachers PLNs: “PLNs will help us develop capable school leaders, teachers who are engaged in healthy school management and towards quality Education”.

But, in order to get there, “there has to be peer learning and experience sharing”, he added. Mutual sharing will also help peer Head Teachers to learn to appreciate and to respect each other. Some communication barriers will be overcome and Head Teachers will not feel ashamed to share their failures and challenges with their peers because they will feel accepted.

“We all strive for the successful performance of our children. We cannot succeed unless we do it together”, he continued.

Although Br. Camille is a strong advocate of Professional Learning Networks for Head Teachers, he also warns his peers about the “take it easy” attitude: “We live in a world that keeps changing every second! In Rwanda alone, a variety of programmes and initiatives are being multiplied at the speed of light. It is therefore important that Head Teachers remain eager to learn continually and as a team.

“Head Teachers need information. That is why PLNs are very important in their learning since they will regularly meet and share. I really and strongly encourage my peers to be actively involved in these networks. And I hope that VOB and SEOs will continue to monitor the progress being made in order to make sure that this great initiative does not end in its inception”.

GENDER SENSITIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

Ensuring that a positive atmosphere is created during Professional Learning Network meetings in order to foster gender equality in participation is perhaps one of the recurring challenges faced by PLNs in various sessions.

In some contexts and often for cultural reasons, women’s participation in PLNs faces some obstacles. Hence the need to develop an environment where active participation from women is not only encouraged but also expected. In some cases, women are much less vocal than men, and men tend to monopolize discussions.

The cultural context, the social environment, and gender relations affect the way women and men participate in Professional Learning Network sessions.

What is a gender sensitive PLN?

A gender sensitive PLN requires a good understanding of the gender relations at stake and the obstacles to women’s active participation in meetings, and other activities as well. These obstacles are addressed by suggesting techniques that meet both female and male Head Teachers’ interests and needs, and by adopting content and facilitation methods that enhances women’s participation.

More precisely, gender sensitive Professional Learning Networks take into account the needs, priorities and expectations of both female and male Head Teachers while planning, conducting and following up on the network’s activities in order to ensure that they receive equitable benefits from the process of learning from one another.

Why gender sensitive PLN?

Traditionally, women and men in our society have had different roles and responsibilities especially when it comes to the power of making decisions. It is therefore important to keep in mind that female and male Head Teachers have different needs and priorities that ought to be taken into account when preparing and conducting any meeting, including PLN sessions.

Proverbs like ‘Nta nkokozi ibika isake ihari’, ‘Inkokozi iteteza nk’izindi bati ngiyo kanwa kabi’ and others have been used to encourage the idea that women should keep quiet during public events and meetings; that men alone should speak. This could favor gender inequalities. Gender should therefore be considered in all sectors - including education - as an issue pertaining to Effectiveness Development, rather than just viewing it as a way of favoring women.

Evidence demonstrates that when women and men are relatively equal, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move quickly out of poverty, and the wellbeing of men, women and children is enhanced (World Bank 2001).
Guidelines for gender sensitive PLNs

Gender sensitive PLNs do not need to directly mention gender issues or talk about gender equality during the PLN meetings. Gender sensitive PLNs aims to ensure the equitable participation of women and men during the PLN process by:

- Setting an agenda that caters for both women and men’s interests as Head Teachers
- Using methods that increase the active participation of both women and men
- Ensuring that both women and men express their true opinion, and listen to and respect each other’s experiences and views
- Creating an atmosphere in which women and men feel respected, safe and encouraged to share their views, and to interact with women and men with diverging views
- Ensuring a learning and sharing environment suitable for both women and men
- Adopting attitudes and behaviors that value differential experiences and perspectives
- Facilitating good communication practices in which misunderstandings, insults, criticisms and demands are recognized and resolved, and participants are brought back to facts, views, and values.

Using gender sensitive PLN facilitation methods

There are many factors that might encourage or inhibit head teachers’ participation, including: language, knowledge of the topic and experience in public speaking. But also, the connections and the social and financial status of the head Teachers can matter. Age and gender are other factors that may affect an HT’s capacity to easily speak in PLN sessions.

Therefore, the facilitator’s role is to create a conducive environment for discussions, for sharing of experiences and best practices, and for critical argumentation. Our social context has showed that even in groups of professionals like Head Teachers, women are less inclined to express their opinion, to share their experience and to ask questions, while men show more confidence in voicing their knowledge.

Some even tend to impose their views as reflective of the group’s view. To have a balanced situation, the facilitator has to especially ensure that introverts and extroverts can all express themselves and that no opinion is rejected or despised. To encourage women’s active involvement in PLN meetings in a given context, the facilitator may directly ask some women participants to share their experience with the group and highlight their contribution – this would be a way to value their experience.
Verene Nyirantezimana has two great passions: being a homemaker for her five kids and being a Head Teacher. A graduate of the Kigali Independent University, she has served as Head Teacher first at Groupe scolaire Murambi and currently at Rwiza Primary School in Kanombe Sector.

With more than 30 years in the field of education (29 years as a teacher and 8 years as a Head Teacher), she was initially reluctant and afraid of becoming Head Teacher when the opportunity first arose 8 years ago.

“I knew the challenges Head Teachers face in the course of their duties, and I was afraid of such huge responsibilities“ she confessed with a smile. “And I felt uneasy at the idea of leading people I considered my peers for many years“.

But school life has proved to be a very enjoyable experience for this unassuming and very passionate school leader: “Nothing is more enjoyable than being in a place where you are surrounded by smiling children most of the day! I am very glad to be here. This is the safest place to be!” she said with conviction.

As the leader of the school, Verene became skilled at handling various school duties and challenges, especially with respect to leading and motivating teachers. “A school leader should be tactful and never use force”, she said. “That is why I have always strived to foster an environment of tolerance in all the schools I have been privileged to lead throughout my career”.

**PLNs are different!**

Over a friendly conversation recently, Verene shared her overwhelming perspective and experience on the impact of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) in her sector.

“PLNs are great. They are really enjoyable and worth attending”, she said in reference to the PLNs workshops that have been facilitated by Sectors Education Officers through the support of VVOB.

“I learned a lot from my interactions with my peers during PLN meetings organized by our SEO. They were a great opportunity to hear about what others have achieved in the management of their schools but also to learn from the challenges they faced. The possibility of learning from our shared experiences to improve the lives of our children has been the most gratifying aspect of these PLNs”.

Verene was particularly impressed by the potential and the resources Head Teachers find by participating in PLNs sessions. “In addition to issues related to school management responsibilities and quality education requirements, I heard and discovered from my peers
many things that I would have never thought about before. I realized from our mutual sharing that there were many other serious problems like hunger and nutrition that are considerably affecting our children’s learning and performance.”

Another issue raised by Verene and that was discussed and shared in PLNs was the problem of children who have been abandoned by either one or both parents. “The consequences of this kind of situation are always heartbreaking! Some children are left without any parental care or authority at home. It is clear that this will endanger the children’s learning at school”.

**Never lose the real focus**

“Authentic School leadership and management should always start with making sure that our children are safe and protected”, she insisted. “This is not the responsibility of one person alone. It requires collaboration and listening to one another as peers. PLNs are the best places to foster this collaboration since they encourage different school leaders to tap into their collective wisdom and resources”.

Although the PLNs sessions are primarily intended for Head Teachers, Verene demonstrated her passion for learning through mutual sharing by recommending the same approach for teachers: “In light of the great treasures and various resources available in peer learning, I would strongly recommend that teachers should also be encouraged to engage in this kind of learning.”

“There are many things teachers can learn from their peers in an open learning environment like PLNs. Issues related to students behavior management, the appropriate use of teaching aids, lesson planning, cognitive skills and active participation can be better discussed in a peer learning environment like PLNs” she explained.

“I strongly encourage every actor in the education sector and Head Teachers in particular to engage in consistent PLNs meetings and sessions. PLNs have the great potential of igniting passion and creating zeal in those who are committed to attend them on a regular basis”, she advocated. “When you learn from others you enrich yourself”.

“There are many things teachers can learn from their peers in an open learning environment like PLNs. Issues related to students behavior management, the appropriate use of teaching aids, lesson planning, cognitive skills and active participation can be better discussed in a peer learning environment like PLNs”
The power of a Professional Learning Network lies in the sharing of knowledge and experiences from the group members. They engage together in challenges of practice in order to have a deeper and more unified understanding of those challenges. Proposed solutions emerge from their investigations and best practices exchanges.

These solutions are then tested in their own daily experiences in order to check their efficiency. Through such a repeated process, practice grows more sophisticated and powerful and the group develops a tighter sense of mutual trust, professional appreciation and common purpose.

Effective Professional Learning Networks for Head Teachers are helpful in sharing and building knowledge among Head Teachers. They also contribute in changing and refining practices and performance. However, bringing Head Teachers together alone does not guarantee growth and development. It can also lead to a monotonous situation whereby everybody is content with the current status quo. Indeed, some conditions are required in order to have a conducive environment for learning and change. Therefore, the most important assignment of a Professional Learning Network Leader is to ensure that all the required conditions are met. We call these conditions the Key Enablers for effective Professional Learning Networks. Let us review them one by one:

**Purpose and focus**

For a Professional Learning Network to be effective and successful, it is imperative to define the purpose of activities and to focus on it. Real questions about challenges that need to be addressed should be asked. It may be an issue of dropouts, or of school feeding, parental involvement, teaching materials, extra-curricular activities, or anything else.

If you really want to improve in a particular area, you need to work on it consistently and for a longer period. It isn’t feasible to try to change everything immediately. It has to be done step by step. The first and perhaps the most significant step will then be to collectively decide on a network’s priorities depending on their degree of importance.

**Relationships**

Relationships are like the threads or the “connective tissue” of professional learning networks. They provide the social capital that allows people to work together over time and exceed what anyone of them could have accomplished alone. Relationships create a common language and a sense of shared responsibility. They provide channels for communicating and disseminating information between network’ members about the other’s expertise. They also foster willingness for mutual trust. Trust is a key condition of productive relationships.
Collaboration

Collaboration encompasses much more than relationships. It is an intensive interaction that engages educators in opening up their beliefs and practices to investigation and debate. Collaboration can be a powerful mechanism for changing ideas and practices, particularly when it involves group work that involves balancing personal support with critical inquiry about present practices and future direction.

Enquiry

Systematic analysis of the situation and professional reflection are regarded as core activities for both individual and collective construction of meaning. Enquiry through the processes of questioning, reflecting, seeking alternatives, and weighing consequences brings to light what might otherwise remain unobservable facets of practice – making tacit knowledge visible and open to scrutiny. Collaborative enquiry creates an opportunity for educators to work together as they explore and consider various sources of knowledge in order to investigate practices and ideas through a number of lenses, and to put forward hypotheses, to challenge beliefs, and to pose more questions.

Leadership

Networks need some kind of leadership to coordinate the collective work. Within a network, each present or future project and activity that is started requires direction and coordination. Professional Learning Networks include many levels of leadership. On one hand, there is the formal SEO leadership which focuses on processes used in the Professional Learning Network to achieve or to hinder effectiveness. On the other hand, there will often be informal leadership which focuses on the quality of content that is exchanged and/or developed. This informal leadership will often be provided by one of the Head Teachers who is an expert in the specific area that is being addressed within a period of time.

Accountability

Both external and internal accountability have a role to play in the change process. External accountability is about being accountable to policymakers and authorities: every member can provide a legitimate explanation of their involvement in a Professional Learning Network with other Head Teachers. Internal accountability, however, is about being and feeling accountable to one another among the participants of a Professional Learning Network. It is this last form of accountability that is like the glue that ties commitment to the result.
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