

Comparing Professional Learning Communities and Professional Learning Networks: A Narrative and Conceptual Literature Review on School-Wide Improvement in International Schools

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ABSTRACT

International schools operate at the intersection of global professional mobility and local institutional demands, creating an environment in which both formally organized and self-directed teacher collaboration are present. This narrative and conceptual literature review, distinct from systematic, empirical, or mixed-methods studies, examines how professional learning communities (PLCs) and professional learning networks (PLNs) are conceptualized in the literature as mechanisms for school-wide improvement in international schools. No primary data were collected; the review does not include original surveys, interviews, structural equation modeling, social network analysis, or student achievement data. Instead, it synthesizes findings and arguments from 33 sources published between 2020 and 2025, including six peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters, one practitioner-oriented published book, and 26 doctoral dissertations and graduate theses. Given that more than three-quarters of the corpus consists of unpublished, non-peer-reviewed graduate research, all claims are attributed to their originating source type rather than collectively as peer-reviewed evidence. The literature associates PLCs with instructional coherence, collective efficacy, and teacher retention, while PLNs are linked to adaptive innovation, reduced professional isolation, and cross-cultural knowledge exchange. Rather than ranking effectiveness, the literature most consistently frames PLCs and PLNs as complementary structures within a mixed model of professional learning. The absence of empirical, international-school-specific comparative studies is identified as the central gap for future research.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, PLCs, Professional Learning Networks, PLNs, International School Improvement, Narrative Literature Review, Conceptual Synthesis, Teacher Collective Efficacy, School Culture

INTRODUCTION

Context of International Schools

International schools function within complex educational environments characterized by cultural diversity, frequent staff turnover, and the integration of multiple curricular frameworks within a single institution. In contrast to most national systems, these schools typically serve transient student populations and employ teachers from varied professional and cultural backgrounds. Within this context, professional development is expected to both enhance teaching practice and support institutional continuity despite ongoing staff changes.

Recent literature identifies a persistent challenge in international contexts: low participation rates in traditional professional development programs. Snider (2025) describes an engagement gap in which teachers perceive mandated professional learning systems as misaligned with their immediate classroom needs. In highly mobile international environments, educators frequently seek more flexible and responsive development opportunities than those provided by standard institutional conferences. This dynamic creates a structural tension between institutionalized collaborative processes and the individualized professional needs of globally mobile teachers.

Concurrently, the literature frequently identifies professional learning communities (PLCs) as a leading

organizational model for structured collaboration. Antinluoma et al. (2021) define PLCs as structured groups based on a shared vision, collaborative inquiry, and evidence-based practice, which, in national-system research, have been associated with school improvement and instructional coherence. However, the extent to which this model is transferable to the unique governance and cultural contexts of international schools remains unresolved.

International schools thus encounter a recurring tension: the need for internal cohesion to maintain academic standards across diverse contexts, contrasted with teachers' reliance on external professional networks to foster innovation and sustain professional identity. This tension underpins the comparative analysis of PLCs and professional learning networks (PLNs) presented in this review.

Statement of the Problem

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are widely recognized as the dominant model of school-based professional collaboration. However, their effectiveness within international schools remains insufficiently examined in the literature. Existing research highlights organized teamwork, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability as key drivers of school improvement (Antinluoma et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these findings are primarily derived from national public school systems rather than from internationally mobile teaching populations.

Formal PLC structures may not adequately address individualized professional development needs, particularly regarding global pedagogical trends, cross-cultural responsiveness, and professional mobility in environments characterized by high turnover and cultural diversity. Snider (2025) finds that professional learning opportunities often lose relevance when they are not aligned with teachers' classroom experiences. In response, educators may supplement institutional collaboration with self-organized professional learning networks (PLNs) that connect peers across geographic and disciplinary boundaries. Brown and Flood (2020) identify PLNs as mechanisms for accessing external knowledge and innovative practices beyond home institutions. Additionally, Washington and O'Connor (2020) demonstrate that a cross-cultural professional network between Canadian and Colombian teachers facilitated the exchange of teaching practices across national contexts.

Accordingly, the central question addressed in this review is not whether collaborative professional learning is beneficial, as the literature broadly concurs on its value, but rather how the internally oriented coherence of PLCs and the externally oriented adaptability of PLNs each contribute to school-wide improvement. Furthermore, this review examines how the literature characterizes the relationship between PLCs and PLNs in international school settings, a comparison that remains insufficiently explored in the current evidence base.

Purpose and Scope of the Review

This paper presents a narrative and conceptual synthesis of literature published between 2020 and 2025, comparing how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) are theorized in relation to instructional coherence, teacher development, leadership capacity, innovation, and organizational sustainability, with a particular focus on internationally mobile school settings. Rather than testing hypotheses, collecting primary data, or reporting statistical findings, this review synthesizes existing sources to identify patterns, points of agreement, and gaps in the literature.

The specific aims of this review are as follows:

1. Synthesize literature relating PLCs to student achievement, teacher self-efficacy, teacher turnover, leadership development, and school culture, as reported in the original studies.
2. Synthesize literature describing PLNs as structures that support professional innovation, global collaboration, teacher well-being, and cross-cultural exchange.
3. Compare, at a conceptual level, the similarities and differences between the localized collaborative model of PLCs and the distributed networked model of PLNs as discussed in the international education literature.

This review draws on 33 sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, peer-reviewed book chapters, one practitioner-oriented book, and doctoral dissertations and graduate theses, to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation on articulating an institutionally coherent and globally responsive model of professional learning

for international schools. As the majority of these sources are unpublished graduate research rather than peer-reviewed publications, the conclusions presented should be interpreted as a structured mapping of current thinking and hypotheses in the field, rather than as validated empirical findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PLC AND PLN EVIDENCE BASE

The PLC Evidence Base

Reported Effects on Student Attainment

Several dissertation studies report an association between the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and student outcomes. Meyer (2020), in a doctoral dissertation, found that schools with higher self-assessed PLC maturity, defined as organized collaboration, data-informed instructional improvement, and collective responsibility, demonstrated stronger student growth on the measures used in that study. Similarly, Adams (2021) identified structured collaborative inquiry as a predictor of longer-term academic gains in the schools examined.

Considered collectively, Meyer (2020) and Adams (2021) indicate a recurring theme in the dissertation literature: PLC maturity is identified as a structural factor linked to instructional coherence and, consequently, student performance. However, as these findings are based on single-institution or small-sample doctoral studies rather than large-scale peer-reviewed research, this pattern should be interpreted as a recurring hypothesis within graduate research literature rather than as an established causal relationship.

Self-Efficacy and Teacher Retention

In addition to influencing student outcomes, several sources identify professional learning communities (PLCs) as relevant to teachers' psychological and professional stability. Carr (2024), in a doctoral dissertation, found that structured collaborative systems were associated with increased teacher self-efficacy by normalizing instructional experimentation, which, in turn, was linked to perseverance in challenging teaching contexts. Similarly, Yann-Tucker (2025) reported that PLC participation was associated with reduced intentions to leave, attributed to enhanced perceived competence and a stronger sense of professional belonging.

Collectively, Carr (2024) and Yann-Tucker (2025) position PLCs as a potential psychological stabilizer, shifting individual teaching accountability toward shared professional accountability. However, both studies are doctoral dissertations with limited sample sizes, and, to date, their retention-related findings have not been replicated in peer-reviewed research focused on international schools.

School Culture Following the Pandemic

Several sources characterize the COVID-19 disruption as a period when professional learning communities (PLCs) were used to re-establish relational trust and re-synchronize instruction. Christie (2023), in a doctoral dissertation, indicates that PLCs functioned as organizational mechanisms to restore coherence, reinforce professional collaboration, and support institutional continuity during pandemic recovery. This process extended beyond instructional recovery to include emotional processing and the realignment of assessment practices.

Table 1 presents a representative subset of the reviewed literature, detailing the thematic focus, source type, setting, and conceptual contribution of eight selected sources. This table is illustrative rather than exhaustive. The complete list of the 33 sources included in this review, along with their source types, is provided in Appendix A.

Table 1: Representative Sample from the Reviewed Literature on PLCs and PLNs

Author(s)	Source Type	Context / Setting	Focus	Conceptual Contribution
Meyer (2020)	Doctoral dissertation	K–12 institutional reform context	PLC implementation and instructional coherence	Sustained PLC engagement associated with instructional alignment and collective efficacy

Author(s)	Source Type	Context / Setting	Focus	Conceptual Contribution
Adams (2021)	Doctoral dissertation	Secondary school reform initiatives	Leadership and collaborative inquiry	Leadership-supported PLC structures associated with pedagogical consistency
Carr (2024)	Doctoral dissertation	International school environment	PLCs and teacher retention	Strong PLC cultures linked to teacher commitment and reduced turnover
Yann-Tucker (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Digital learning ecosystems	PLNs and digital collaboration	Online PLNs expanded access to instructional practices
Christie (2023)	Doctoral dissertation	Whole-school improvement strategy	PLC maturity and school recovery	Advanced PLC development supported institutional coordination
Brown & Flood (2020).	Peer-reviewed journal article	Professional development frameworks	PLC effectiveness and instructional practice	PLC participation encouraged reflective professional dialogue
Justis (2024)	Graduate thesis/dissertation	Technology-integrated schools	Hybrid PLC–PLN structures	Blended collaborative systems associated with institutional adaptability
Washington & O'Connor (2020).	Peer-reviewed book chapter	Educational change management	Collaborative culture and reform sustainability	Embedded collaborative structures supported long-term reform continuity

Source: Synthesized from the sources cited in each row; see Appendix A for the full corpus.

The pattern presented in Table 1 is consistent throughout the entire corpus. Sources that address instructional coherence, collaborative culture, teacher efficacy, leadership development, and institutional resilience primarily focus on professional learning communities (PLCs). In contrast, sources that discuss professional autonomy, digital networking, innovation, and cross-cultural learning primarily focus on professional learning networks (PLNs).

The PLN Evidence Base

The Role of School Leaders

Brown and Flood (2020) identify school leaders as bridging agents who translate externally sourced knowledge into internal reform. Their analysis suggests that leadership mediation is critical in determining whether external ideas are integrated into school systems or remain marginal. The impact of professional learning networks (PLNs) is greatest when leaders serve as curators and interpreters of external innovation. In the absence of such leadership, PLNs may remain informal or become misaligned with organizational priorities.

Personal Learning Spaces

Justis (2024) analyzes the physical and digital environments in which professional networking occurs, characterizing hybrid ecosystems—including online platforms, conferences, and informal peer exchanges—as the primary framework for contemporary professional development. The study demonstrates that these personal learning spaces foster geography-independent knowledge networks, thereby increasing exposure to diverse teaching methods. Furthermore, intentional curation of networks is associated with enhanced career development.

Collaborative Intercultural Professionalism

Washington and O'Connor (2020), in a peer-reviewed book chapter, examine transnational collaboration between

Canadian and Colombian teachers. They report that professional learning networks (PLNs) facilitate cultural exchange, the adoption of adaptable teaching methods, and improvements in cross-cultural competence. The authors further describe PLNs as a means for international benchmarking and intercultural professional alignment within international school contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Social Capital Theory

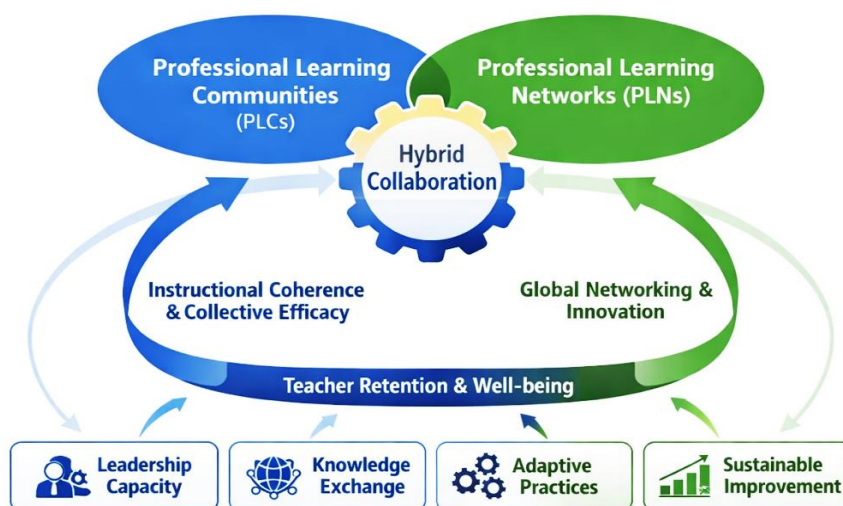
Liou (2025), in a peer-reviewed book chapter, applies a social-network approach to teacher leadership within social capital theory, contending that professional influence is determined by relationships rather than formal authority. Reform capacity is posited to depend on network density, reciprocity, and bridging capital. From this perspective, professional learning communities (PLCs) are theorized to build bonding capital within a school, while professional learning networks (PLNs) are theorized to build bridging capital across institutions. Collectively, these elements constitute a multidimensional social-capital ecosystem relevant to the sustainability of educational reform.

Collective Efficacy Cycles

Speck (2025), in a doctoral dissertation, conceptualizes collective efficacy as a series of collective efficacy loops. In this framework, group confidence, developed through shared instructional success, is theorized to enhance future collaboration and willingness to take risks. Specifically, within Professional Learning Community (PLC) structures, this process is characterized as a cycle: collaboration leads to improved outcomes, these outcomes increase confidence, and heightened confidence, in turn, promotes sustained collaboration.

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual model, developed from the reviewed literature, that connects Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), social capital, Professional Learning Networks (PLNs), collective efficacy, and institutional outcomes. This model serves as a heuristic tool synthesizing arguments from the cited sources. It is not based on statistical analysis, and the depicted relationships should be interpreted as conceptual propositions for future empirical investigation rather than as established causal pathways.

Figure 1. Integrated PLC–PLN Theoretical Model



Source: Conceptual model developed from Liou (2025) and Speck (2025), informed by Meyer (2020); Adams (2021), Carr (2024); Yann-Tucker (2025), Christie (2023); Brown and Flood (2020); Justis (2024); Washington & O'Connor (2020).

Figure 1. Conceptual (Non-Empirical) PLC–PLN Theoretical Model

Source: Conceptual model developed from Liou (2025) and Speck (2025), informed by the broader reviewed corpus.

The model demonstrates that professional learning communities (PLCs) are theorized to foster internal collective efficacy, whereas professional learning networks (PLNs) are posited to develop external social capital. These constructs are conceptually linked and are proposed to jointly influence outcomes such as student achievement and teacher retention. The two-way arrows in the model indicate hypothesized feedback loops identified in the literature, rather than measured correlations or empirically established weights.

Concluding Synthesis

The reviewed literature consistently associates collaborative professional structures with both academic and organizational outcomes. However, the majority of this evidence originates from single-site doctoral research, rather than from peer-reviewed, multi-site, or international school-specific studies. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are primarily linked to student growth, teacher effectiveness, retention, and cultural stabilization, while Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) are mainly connected to knowledge sharing, leadership mediation, and cross-cultural professionalism. Two conceptual frameworks, collective efficacy cycles (Speck, 2025) and social capital theory (Liou, 2025), are employed in this review to organize these relationships. Overall, the sources support the working assumption, rather than a definitive conclusion, that sustainable school change results from the interaction between internally organized collaboration and externally mediated networking.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Rationale

This study constitutes a narrative and conceptual literature review. It is not a systematic review as defined by PRISMA guidelines, nor does it represent an empirical or mixed-methods investigation. No original sample, recruitment process, survey instrument, interview protocol, structural equation model, social network analysis, or student achievement data are reported. No primary data involving human participants were collected; therefore, institutional ethical approval was neither sought nor required. Where cited studies report their own participants and ethical approvals, responsibility remains with the original authors, and such details are not reiterated in this review.

This review adopts a desk-based, interpretive synthesis approach, comparing, interpreting, and integrating arguments and findings reported in scholarly and graduate research sources published between 2020 and 2025. The design adheres to established conventions for narrative and critical literature reviews, including a transparent search strategy, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, a documented screening process, and a defined approach to source appraisal. However, it does not adhere to formal systematic review protocols such as dual independent screening, PRISMA flow reporting, or meta-analytic pooling, which are necessary to classify a review as systematic.

Search Strategy

A desk-based search was conducted using scholarly databases and institutional repositories, such as Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, and university repositories. The search encompassed material published from January 2020 to mid-2025. Search terms comprised combinations of “Professional Learning Communities,” “Professional Learning Networks,” “PLC implementation,” “PLN collaboration,” “teacher collective efficacy,” “teacher leadership,” “school culture,” “international school improvement,” “teacher wellness,” “collaborative professionalism,” and “instructional coherence,” as well as “post-pandemic educational recovery,” “distributed leadership,” “digital collaboration,” and “cross-cultural learning environments.”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they satisfied all of the following criteria:

- Published between 2020 and 2025; earlier foundational theory on social capital or collective efficacy was retained only when directly cited by an included source.

- Written in English;
- Reported on or theorized about professional learning communities, professional learning networks, collaborative professionalism, teacher leadership, or organizational learning within K–12 education;
- Available as a peer-reviewed journal article, peer-reviewed book chapter, practitioner-oriented published book, or a doctoral dissertation or graduate thesis with publicly accessible full text.

Sources were excluded if they met any of the following criteria:

- Duplicate records;
- Not available in English or not accessible in full text;
- Opinion pieces, blog posts, or conference abstracts lacking an underlying study or substantive conceptual argument;
- Focused on professional development models unrelated to professional learning communities or professional learning networks, such as single-workshop training with no collaborative or network structure.

Quality Appraisal

Given that the corpus includes both peer-reviewed publications and doctoral dissertations or graduate theses (considered “grey literature” in systematic reviews), two distinct appraisal approaches were implemented. Peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters were evaluated based on methodological transparency, relevance to the review question, and confirmation of peer-review status by the journal or publisher. Dissertations and theses were additionally assessed using criteria aligned with the AACODS checklist for grey literature (Authority, Accuracy, Coverage, Objectivity, Date, Significance), with particular attention to institutional authority (a recognized degree-granting university), a clearly stated methodology, and relevance to PLC/PLN theory or practice. This appraisal process determined inclusion and informed the degree of confidence with which each source's claims are presented in the text (for example, “reports” or “found in one dissertation-level study”), rather than assigning a numeric quality score, which was deemed unnecessary for a narrative synthesis of this scope.

This appraisal step also addresses a key limitation in the evidence base of this review. Since over three-quarters of the included sources are unpublished dissertations or theses that have not undergone external peer review, the findings from these sources are presented as observations from individual graduate studies rather than as established or generalizable empirical results.

Corpus Composition

The final synthesis corpus consists of 33 sources: 6 peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters, 1 practitioner-oriented published book, and 26 doctoral dissertations or graduate theses. A complete list of included sources, along with their types and thematic focuses, is provided in Appendix A. Doctoral and graduate research was intentionally retained because much of the most directly relevant work on PLCs and PLNs in international school settings is currently available only at the dissertation level. However, this composition indicates that the corpus should be interpreted as a representation of an emerging and largely unpublished body of graduate research, rather than as an evidence base with the rigor typically associated with sources drawn primarily from peer-reviewed journals.

Thematic Synthesis Procedure

All included sources were read in full and coded inductively according to recurring analytical domains: PLC maturity and collaborative culture; collective efficacy and professional confidence; teacher wellness and professional sustainability; PLN engagement and external collaboration; leadership capacity and professional mediation; and school culture and institutional adaptability. This coding process was interpretive rather than statistical, grouping sources by shared conceptual claims and arguments rather than by quantitatively measured relationships. Table 2 summarizes the conceptual domains identified through this coding and the sources most closely associated with each domain.

Table 2: Conceptual Domains Derived from Thematic Analysis

Conceptual Domain	Analytical Focus	Key Sources
PLC Maturity and Collaborative Culture	Instructional coherence, collaborative inquiry, shared professional accountability	Christensen (2025); Antinluoma et al. (2021); Urieta (2025); Watkins (2021); Sherman (2022)
Collective Efficacy and Professional Confidence	Shared instructional belief systems and collaborative trust	Gaham III (2021); Speck (2025); Wilson (2025); Hanron (2024)
Teacher Wellness and Professional Sustainability	Professional belonging, teacher retention, reduced isolation	Carr (2024); Lam (2025); Yann-Tucker (2025); Ramalho (2025)
PLN Engagement and External Collaboration	Digital networking, cross-cultural learning, distributed professional exchange	Justis (2024); Brown & Flood (2020); Poortman & Brown (2023); Washington & O'Connor (2020)
Leadership Capacity and Professional Mediation	Teacher leadership, mentoring, organizational influence	Liou (2025); Neufeld (2025); Zhang (2025); Hunter (2021)
School Culture and Institutional Adaptability	Organizational resilience, trust, collaborative reform processes	Carozza (2023); Christie (2023); Tan (2025); Ye (2022); Steven (2023); Martinez (2021)

Source: Synthesized from the reviewed corpus (see Appendix A).

The coding reveals that sources focused on professional learning communities (PLCs) cluster around institutional collaboration, instructional alignment, and collective culture. In contrast, sources centered on professional learning networks (PLNs) emphasize flexibility, digital connection, innovation, and external exchange. Leadership development, teacher efficacy, and organizational resilience are identified as recurring outcomes associated with both models.

COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the conceptual synthesis of the 33-source corpus described in Section 3. It compares how professional learning communities (PLCs) and professional learning networks (PLNs) are characterized in the literature regarding school-wide improvement, teacher wellness, and leadership development within international school contexts. The analysis is organized into three thematic dimensions: stability versus innovation, isolation versus wellness, and leadership capacity. As a conceptual synthesis, this section reports patterns in how the literature frames these relationships rather than statistically tested differences between PLCs and PLNs.

Theme 1: Stability versus Innovation

The literature consistently distinguishes between the stabilizing role attributed to PLCs and the innovation-enabling role associated with PLNs. Urieta (2025) indicates that mature PLCs establish norms for collective instructional responsibility and standardized operational routines relevant to core processes in secondary schools. This structure facilitates systematic alignment of curriculum objectives and collaborative lesson planning (Adams, 2021; Meyer, 2020; Valckx, 2021). In contrast, research on PLNs highlights a distributed model in which teachers access practices from a broader network of peers and adopt emerging digital tools (Justis, 2024; Washington & O'Connor, 2020). Table 3 provides a qualitative summary of these contrasts across the corpus.

Table 3: Qualitative Typology Characterizing PLCs and PLNs in the Reviewed Literature

Aspect	How PLCs Are Characterized	How PLNs Are Characterized	Illustrative Sources
Structural Stability	Standardized procedures, curriculum alignment, institutional unity	Highly flexible, reliant on individual initiative and peripheral exchange	Adams (2021); Meyer (2020); Urieta (2025)
Pedagogical Innovation	Bounded by predefined school objectives	Enables cross-cultural knowledge exchange and novel teaching strategies	Justis (2024); Poortman & Brown (2023); Washington & O'Connor (2020)
Teacher Engagement	Structured/mandatory; reinforces team accountability	Autonomous; associated with individual agency and intrinsic motivation	Carr (2024); Lam (2025); Snider (2025)
Professional Growth	Local capacity-building, context-specific goals	Global expertise via cross-border networks and online platforms	Brown & Flood (2020); Neufeld (2025); Yann-Tucker (2025)

Source: Synthesized qualitatively from the cited sources; categories reflect recurring descriptive language in the corpus, not measured or scored variables.

Collectively, these sources indicate that professional learning communities (PLCs) serve as a buffer against instructional inconsistency resulting from international staff turnover, whereas professional learning networks (PLNs) function as a counterweight to institutional insularity (Justis, 2024; Valckx, 2021). Both Justis (2024) and Valckx (2021) interpretively conclude that achieving a balance between local instructional coherence and global educational relevance is most feasible when structured internal PLC protocols are combined with open access to PLNs.

Theme 2: Isolation and Teacher Wellness

Multiple studies link teacher well-being to the structure of professional collaboration. Carr (2024) finds that participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) is associated with increased perceived competence and a stronger sense of professional belonging. Both Carr (2024) and Lam (2025) identify institutionalized PLC culture as a potential buffer against burnout. Conversely, other research highlights that formal, school-directed PLCs may introduce administrative constraints, resulting in additional performance pressures (Justis, 2024; Poortman & Brown, 2023; Washington & O'Connor, 2020). In contrast, self-directed professional learning networks (PLNs) are described as valuable spaces for emotional and professional recovery, providing opportunities for self-monitoring, external peer validation, and exposure to innovation without local administrative oversight (Brown & Flood, 2020; Hunter, 2021; Justis, 2024).

Figure 2 illustrates a conceptual typology that synthesizes the literature's characterization of the relationship between localized and distributed support pathways for teacher wellness. Similar to Figure 1, this diagram serves as a qualitative, heuristic tool based on the reviewed arguments. It does not include statistical weightings, percentages, or empirically derived coefficients. The arrows represent the direction of hypothesized relationships as described in the literature, rather than measured correlations.

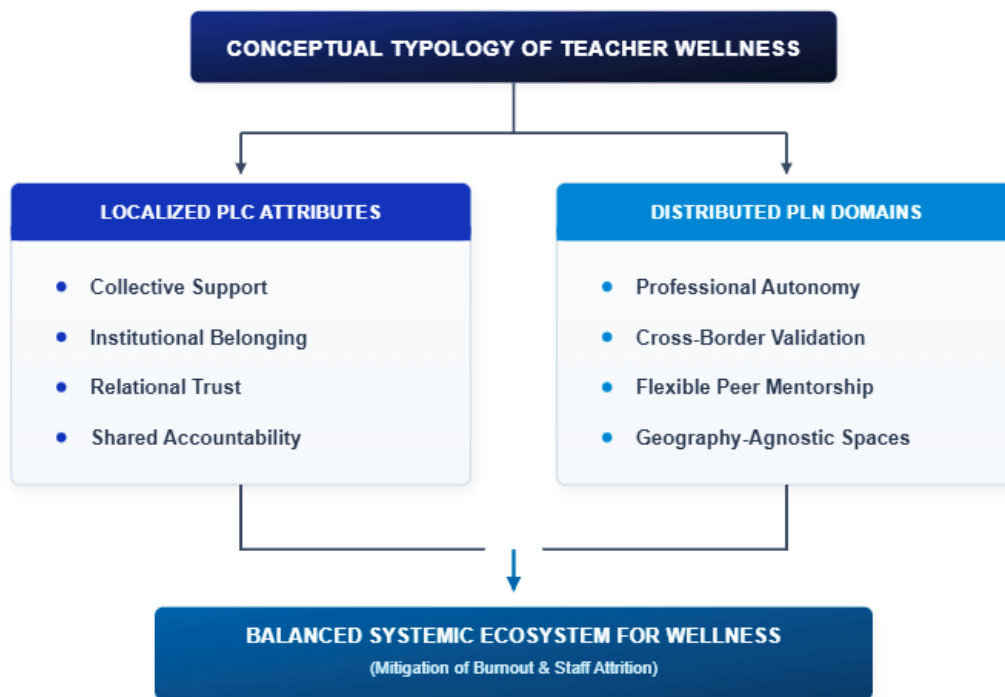


Figure 2. Conceptual Typology of Teacher Wellness Factors within Collaborative Ecosystems

Source: Conceptualized from Brown & Flood (2020); Carr (2024); Hunter (2021); Justis (2024); Lam (2025); Poortman & Brown (2023); Washington & O'Connor (2020).

Theme 3: Leadership Capacity

A third recurring theme is leadership development facilitated by distributed accountability. Neufeld (2025) indicates that mature professional learning communities (PLCs) serve as informal training grounds for teacher leadership, enabling non-administrative staff to engage in peer mentoring, collaborative facilitation, and instructional coaching. This approach aligns with the transition from hierarchical to participatory leadership models described by Liou (2025). Multiple sources suggest that internal leadership development is further enhanced when linked to external professional networks (Poortman & Brown, 2023; Washington & O'Connor, 2020). Professional learning networks (PLNs) are identified as channels through which emerging leaders introduce external validation and cross-cultural benchmarking into their institutions (Hunter, 2021; Ye, 2022; Zhang, 2025).

DISCUSSION

A synthesis of the 33 reviewed sources demonstrates that the literature prioritizes examining interactions between Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) over selecting one model over the other. The thematic patterns identified in Section 4 are analyzed within the frameworks of social capital theory and collective efficacy cycles, leading to the proposal of an integrated conceptual framework for professional learning in international schools. This framework synthesizes existing arguments rather than presenting a newly empirically tested model.

A Social Capital Reading of Stability versus Innovation

The reviewed literature suggests that both institutional and pedagogical dimensions of social capital theory contribute to understanding the tension between stability and innovation. Liou (2025) argues that organizational resilience and reform capacity are influenced by the density, reciprocity, and distribution of relationships within an organization. This review applies this perspective to characterize PLCs and PLNs as fostering two distinct, yet potentially complementary, forms of social capital.

PLCs are theorized to cultivate bonding social capital. Local PLCs establish standard curricular schedules and shared inquiry cycles (Adams, 2021; Meyer, 2020; Urieta, 2025), which multiple sources link to relational trust and curriculum continuity, even amid staff mobility (Carozza, 2023; Christensen, 2025; Valckx, 2021). However, some sources caution that excessive reliance on internal bonding capital may lead to conformity or insularity (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Snider, 2025). In contrast, PLNs are theorized to generate bridging social capital through weak ties that cross institutional boundaries via virtual environments, conferences, and professional networks (Poortman & Brown, 2023; Justis, 2024). This process introduces new approaches, technologies, and cross-cultural insights (Washington & O'Connor, 2020). Several sources argue that school improvement is most likely when leaders intentionally integrate externally sourced PLN insights into internal PLC structures (Brown & Flood, 2020; Kelly, 2024; Sherman, 2022).

Professional Isolation and Teacher Wellness: The Efficacy Loop

The literature indicates a strong conceptual link between reduced teacher isolation and enhanced teacher wellness. Speck (2025) outlines collective efficacy cycles, wherein group instructional success fosters team confidence, subsequently encouraging further collaboration and risk-taking. Multiple dissertation-level studies find that formal professional learning communities (PLCs) facilitate this process by transforming individual classroom challenges into shared, collaboratively addressed issues (Gaham III, 2021; Hanron, 2024; Speck, 2025). This process is associated with decreased isolation, increased self-efficacy, and reduced turnover intentions (Carr, 2024; Lam, 2025).

Additional studies observe that when trust is limited or administrative oversight is excessive, the efficacy cycle may be disrupted (Christie, 2023; Martinez, 2021; Shaw, 2024). In such contexts, professional learning networks (PLNs) are identified as alternative sources of psychological support, providing self-directed and non-evaluative peer validation (Justis, 2024; Poortman & Brown, 2023; Ramalho, 2025). Collectively, the literature positions PLCs as mechanisms that anchor teachers within their institutions, while PLNs are seen as sustaining individual motivation and autonomy (Hunter, 2021; Speck, 2025).

Leadership Capacity and Distributed Governance

Multiple sources indicate that sustainable teacher leadership development requires a strategic combination of internal and external pathways. Neufeld (2025) and Liou (2025) contend that leadership capacity should extend beyond formal organizational roles and be distributed throughout the school's broader social network. The literature demonstrates that this distribution can occur through formal Professional Learning Community (PLC) mechanisms, such as department-level decision-making that assigns teachers direct responsibility for curriculum design and peer mentoring (Steven, 2023; Watkins, 2021; Valckx, 2021; Wilson, 2025). Additionally, Professional Learning Network (PLN) engagement exposes educators to external leadership models, cross-contextual change strategies, and global benchmarks (Poortman & Brown, 2023; Washington & O'Connor, 2020; Ye, 2022; Zhang, 2025). Middle leaders and instructional coaches are frequently identified as connectors who integrate external insights into internal decision-making processes (Hunter, 2021; Zhang, 2025; Christie, 2023; Carozza, 2023; Tan, 2025).

Integrative Implications for International-School Leadership and Policy

Across the three thematic dimensions, the reviewed literature consistently characterizes PLCs and PLNs as complementary rather than competing frameworks. PLCs are linked to structure, accountability, and bonding capital, which promote instructional consistency (Adams, 2021; Meyer, 2020; Urieta, 2025). In contrast, PLNs are associated with adaptive innovation, autonomy, and bridging capital, supporting pedagogical renewal and mitigating burnout (Justis, 2024; Poortman & Brown, 2023; Washington & O'Connor, 2020).

Collectively, the reviewed sources indicate—based primarily on dissertation-level evidence rather than validated findings—that international-school leaders may benefit from viewing PLCs and PLNs as complementary rather than substitutable. Deliberately linking the structure and data orientation of PLCs with the flexibility and global reach of PLNs is recommended (Carr, 2024; Lam, 2025; Neufeld, 2025; Speck, 2025). However, this conclusion should be regarded as a hypothesis for future empirical investigation rather than an evidence-based recommendation, given the nature of the underlying corpus.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This narrative and conceptual review analyzes how professional learning communities (PLCs) and professional learning networks (PLNs) are conceptualized in the literature as frameworks for teacher development, distributed leadership, and school-wide improvement in international schools. The review synthesizes 33 sources, including 6 peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters, 1 practitioner-oriented book, and 26 doctoral dissertations or graduate theses, and presents key conclusions, recommendations, and limitations.

Conclusions

The reviewed literature links professional learning communities (PLCs) to instructional stability, shared inquiry, and collective teacher efficacy (Adams, 2021; Meyer, 2020; Urieta, 2025). Structured peer problem-solving within PLCs is associated with reduced teacher isolation and turnover (Carr, 2024; Lam, 2025; Snider, 2025). Professional learning networks (PLNs) are connected to expanded access to pedagogical innovation and international collaboration (Justis, 2024; Poortman & Brown, 2023; Washington & O'Connor, 2020). Rather than presenting these as competing models, the literature typically characterizes PLCs as fostering internal bonding capital and PLNs as facilitating external bridging capital (Hunter, 2021; Liou, 2025; Neufeld, 2025; Zhang, 2025). Several sources indicate that integrating the internal stability of PLCs with the external reach of PLNs may promote sustainable improvement in international-school systems (Carr, 2024; Justis, 2024; Lam, 2025; Urieta, 2025).

Recommendations for Practice

1. Design school professional learning structures that intentionally connect in-school PLC collaboration with external PLN platforms where appropriate (Justis, 2024; Poortman & Brown, 2023; Washington & O'Connor, 2020).
2. Foster distributed leadership by pairing robust department-level PLC structures with opportunities for leaders to incorporate external expertise acquired through PLN participation (Liou, 2025; Neufeld, 2025; Zhang, 2025).
3. Promote teacher wellness by combining PLC-based collective problem-solving with PLN-based autonomy and external validation (Carr, 2024; Lam, 2025; Snider, 2025).

These recommendations are presented as literature-informed hypotheses for practice, aligned with patterns identified in the reviewed corpus. Given that the corpus is primarily composed of single-site dissertation research rather than peer-reviewed, multi-site, or international-school-specific empirical studies, school leaders are advised to treat these recommendations as a foundation for local evaluation rather than as validated prescriptions.

Limitations

- This review adopts a narrative and conceptual approach rather than a systematic methodology. The search and screening process was transparent but not exhaustive, and formal dual-reviewer screening was not implemented.
- Over three-quarters of the included sources (26 of 33) consist of doctoral dissertations or graduate theses that have not undergone external peer review. Findings from these sources are presented as single-study observations rather than established evidence.
- This review did not involve the collection of primary data, nor was any statistical synthesis, such as meta-analysis, conducted. Comparisons between PLCs and PLNs are therefore qualitative and interpretive.
- Few included sources focus specifically on international schools. Much of the PLC evidence base is derived from national public-school systems and may not be directly transferable to internationally mobile teaching contexts.
- The conceptual models in Figures 1 and 2, as well as the typology in Table 3, serve as heuristic devices synthesizing arguments from the literature. These models are not empirically derived and do not include statistical weightings.

Directions for Future Research

The most significant gap identified in this review is the absence of empirical studies focused specifically on international schools that directly compare PLC and PLN structures. Future research employing original empirical designs, such as mixed-methods studies that integrate teacher surveys, interviews, and, where feasible, retention or achievement data across defined samples of international schools, is necessary to test the proposed associations. Longitudinal studies tracking retention outcomes across various PLC and PLN configurations, as well as research examining digital-hybrid professional learning spaces in internationally mobile contexts (Christie, 2023; Justis, 2024; Lam, 2025), would substantially strengthen the evidence base.

Appendix A: Full List of Sources Included in the Review

Table 1 presents all 33 sources included in this review, specifying their source type and primary thematic focus, as described in Section 3.5. Complete bibliographic details for each source are provided in the References section.

Author(s) & Year	Source Type	Primary Thematic Focus
Adams (2021)	Doctoral dissertation	Leadership-supported collaborative inquiry and instructional consistency in secondary PLCs
Antinluoma, Ilomäki, & Toom (2021)	Peer-reviewed journal article	Foundational practices and structural features of PLCs
Brown & Flood (2020).	Peer-reviewed journal article	School leaders as bridging agents who maximize PLN impact
Carozza (2023)	Doctoral dissertation	PLC model's impact on elementary school culture
Carr (2024)	Doctoral dissertation	PLCs, teacher practice, and teacher retention
Christensen (2025)	Peer-reviewed journal article	A global measure of PLC characteristics
Christie (2023)	Doctoral dissertation	PLC practices strengthening school culture post-COVID-19
Gaham III (2021).	Doctoral dissertation	PLC characteristics and teacher collective efficacy
Hanron (2024)	Doctoral dissertation	PLCs, teaching efficacy, and inclusive STEM practice
Hunter (2021)	Doctoral dissertation	PLC continuous-improvement model for instructional coaches
Justis (2024)	Graduate thesis/dissertation	Teachers' descriptions of PLN spaces
Kelly (2024)	Thesis/dissertation	Teachers' perceptions of PLCs
Lam (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Teacher wellness through PLCs
Liou (2025)	Peer-reviewed book chapter	Social-network approach to teacher leadership
Martinez (2021)	Thesis/dissertation	Rural teacher and leader perspectives on PLCs
Meyer (2020)	Doctoral dissertation	PLC effects on student academic achievement
Neufeld (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Building teacher leadership capacity through PLCs
Poortman & Brown (2023).	Practitioner-oriented published book	Guide to successful PLNs

Author(s) & Year	Source Type	Primary Thematic Focus
Ramalho (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	PLCs and Tier II social-emotional support systems
Sherman (2022)	Doctoral dissertation	Educator perspectives on PLC implementation
Shaw (2024)	Doctoral dissertation	Teachers' perceptions of effective PLCs
Snider (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Engagement gaps in international-school professional learning
Speck (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Collective efficacy cycles in PLCs
Steven (2023)	Thesis/dissertation	Status of PLCs in Ugandan secondary schools
Tan (2025)	Doctoral dissertation (EdD)	Shifts in school culture within a PLC
Urieta (2025)	Thesis/dissertation	Effectiveness of teacher PLCs in secondary education
Valckx (2021)	Doctoral dissertation	Departments as PLCs in secondary education
Washington & O'Connor (2020).	Peer-reviewed book chapter	Cross-cultural PLNs (Canada–Colombia)
Watkins (2021)	Doctoral dissertation	Attributes of successful secondary PLCs
Wilson (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Administrator experiences of PLC implementation
Yann-Tucker (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	PLCs, self-efficacy, and multilingual-learner support
Ye (2022)	Peer-reviewed journal article	School principals and PLCs in China
Zhang (2025)	Doctoral dissertation	Professional development for middle leaders in China

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