

# CHANGING TEACHING PRACTICES: THE IMPACT OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM ON AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER

CAMBIOS EN PRÁCTICAS DOCENTES: IMPACTO DE UN PROGRAMA DE DESARROLLO PROFESIONAL EN UNA PROFESORA DE INGLÉS

CHANGEMENTS DANS LES PRATIQUES D'ENSEIGNEMENT : L'IMPACT D'UN PROGRAMME DE DÉVELOPPEMENT PROFESSIONNEL CHEZ UNE ENSEIGNANTE D'ANGLAIS

**Ana María Sierra Piedrahíta**

*Ph.D. Curriculum and Instruction,  
University of Wisconsin-Madison,  
Madison, WI, USA. Full-time  
professor, School of Languages,  
Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia.  
Mailing address: Calle 67  
No. 53-108, Ciudad Universitaria,  
Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín,  
Colombia.*

*E-mail: ana.sierra@udea.edu.co*

This article reports some of the findings of a study conducted by the author as a requirement to graduate from the doctoral program in Curriculum and Instruction at University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.

## ABSTRACT

Professional development programs in the form of learning communities offer teachers the possibility of improving their practice, and support them in meeting the demands that the government and society have assigned them, provided that such programs are well designed and developed. These programs may provide teachers with the necessary support and learning opportunities to face the new academic demands and be able to integrate these with the social and moral dimension of schooling. However, in Colombia the idea of schoolteachers working in learning communities as a means of professional development is scarce. Therefore, little systematic research has been conducted in the country to understand their impact on teachers' learning, and even more specifically on their practice; only a few studies have been conducted to understand this issue. The case study reported here focused on understanding how an English teacher changed her teaching practice with the support of a facilitator in a teacher learning community. Data was gathered through interviews, class observations, recorded meetings, teachers' planning units and pedagogical materials. Results indicate that the teacher experienced changes in her teaching practice related to new patterns of teaching behavior and methodology. However, there were some aspects of these two components that she changed only to a limited extent. As a result, she faced some difficulties with students and some contextual factors that affected her learning process. This study reveals several contributions that a learning community can offer to in-service teachers to improve their teaching practice and the complexity of teacher learning under certain circumstances.

**Keywords:** teacher learning, learning communities, professional development, changing teaching practice, English teachers

## RESUMEN

Los programas de desarrollo profesional en forma de comunidades de aprendizaje ofrecen a los profesores la posibilidad de mejorar su práctica, los apoyan en el logro de las demandas que el gobierno y la sociedad les han asignado cuando estos son bien diseñados y desarrollados. Estos programas les dan a los profesores el apoyo necesario y las oportunidades de aprendizaje para enfrentar las demandas académicas que les han sido impuestas, y ser capaces de integrarlas a

las dimensiones sociales y morales de la escuela. Sin embargo, en Colombia la idea de que los profesores hagan parte de comunidades de aprendizaje como un medio para su desarrollo profesional es escasa. Como resultado de esto, pocas investigaciones se han llevado a cabo en el país para saber su impacto en el aprendizaje de los profesores, específicamente, las prácticas pedagógicas de los docentes. Solo unos cuantos estudios se han llevado a cabo para entender este asunto. El estudio de caso que se reporta aquí se enfocó en entender cómo una profesora de inglés cambió sus prácticas de enseñanza con el apoyo de una facilitadora en una comunidad de aprendizaje de profesores. Los datos fueron recogidos a través de entrevistas, observaciones de clase, grabaciones de reuniones, planeaciones de unidades de los profesores y materiales pedagógicos. Los resultados indican que la profesora experimentó cambios relacionados con patrones de comportamiento en su enseñanza y su metodología. Sin embargo, hubo ciertos aspectos de estos dos componentes que la profesora cambió solo hasta cierto punto. Como resultado de esto, algunas dificultades con los estudiantes y con algunos factores contextuales afectaron su proceso de aprendizaje. Este estudio muestra las contribuciones que una comunidad de aprendizaje puede ofrecer a los profesores en servicio para mejorar su enseñanza y la complejidad del aprendizaje del profesor bajo ciertas circunstancias.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje de profesores, comunidades de aprendizaje, desarrollo profesional, cambio en la enseñanza, profesores de inglés

### RÉSUMÉ

Les programmes de développement professionnel sous forme de communautés d'apprentissage offrent aux enseignants la possibilité d'améliorer leurs pratiques. Ils leur donnent également du soutien pour pouvoir répondre aux demandes du gouvernement et de la société quand ils sont bien conçus et bien développés. Ces programmes donnent l'appui nécessaire et les opportunités d'apprentissage aux enseignants pour faire face aux demandes académiques et être en mesure de les intégrer aux dimensions sociales et morales de l'école. Néanmoins, en Colombie, l'idée que les enseignants fassent partie de communautés d'apprentissage comme modèle de développement professionnel est rare. En conséquence, peu de recherches ont été faites dans le pays afin de connaître leur impact sur l'apprentissage des enseignants et notamment sur leurs pratiques pédagogiques. Très peu d'études ont été menées dans le but de comprendre ce domaine. Dans cette étude de cas, on cherchait à comprendre comment une enseignante d'anglais a changé ses pratiques d'enseignement avec l'appui d'une enseignante facilitatrice dans une communauté d'apprentissage des enseignants. Les données ont été récoltées par l'entremise d'entretiens, d'observations de cours, d'enregistrements de réunions, de séances de planification d'unités des enseignants et de matériels pédagogiques. Les résultats nous montrent que l'enseignante a expérimenté des changements par rapport aux modèles de comportement dans son enseignement et sa méthodologie d'enseignement. Cependant, l'enseignante n'a changé que jusqu'à un certain point quelques aspects de ces deux composantes. En plus, quelques difficultés avec les étudiants et avec des facteurs contextuels ont affecté son processus d'apprentissage. Cette étude montre les contributions qu'une communauté d'apprentissage peut offrir aux enseignants dans le but d'améliorer leur enseignement et la complexité de l'apprentissage de l'apprenant dans certaines circonstances.

**Mots-clés :** apprentissage des enseignants, communautés d'apprentissage, développement professionnel, changement dans l'enseignement, enseignants d'anglais

## Introduction

Nowadays, teachers in schools are expected to adapt curricula and improve or modify teaching practices in order to help students achieve foreign language proficiency levels and competencies set by the Colombian government—which are measured using the scores obtained on standardized tests. When students do not succeed at such tests, teachers are consistently considered to be responsible for it. Nevertheless, such a failure is never treated as the result of the inappropriate or ineffective professional development models teachers are offered, which, for the most part, continue to be traditional, short term, and top-down, i.e. workshops, courses or seminars based on new knowledge generated by university researchers or experts in the area, content and methodologies following the criteria established by policymakers (Sierra-Piedrahíta, 2016), textbooks promoted by publishing houses, or academics hired by the government. The government's continuous focus on these types of initiatives thus results in almost no sufficient outcomes, which indicates that most professional development is ineffective (Long, 2014). Given this situation, school teachers require professional development programs (PDPs, hereafter) that may provide them with the support and learning opportunities necessary to face the new academic demands imposed on them and integrate these demands with the social and moral dimension of schooling. Learning communities offer teachers the possibility to accomplish this. However, in Colombia the idea of school-teachers working in learning communities for the purpose of professional development is uncommon. Therefore, little systematic research has been conducted to understand their impact on teachers' learning, and more specifically their impact on their practice; few studies have been conducted in Colombia to understand this issue (See Giraldo, 2014; Chaves & Guapacha, 2016). Thus, this study focused on understanding how teachers changed their practice as they worked with the facilitator in a teacher community, among other issues. The case reported in this paper is that of

Marcela, one of the two teachers who were the focus of this study.

To examine this, a group of nine in-service high school English teachers were offered a PDP. The program was set up as a partnership between a public university and two urban high schools. The guiding purpose of this PDP was to design and implement a new English curriculum based on performance standards set by the Colombian national government for English teaching in elementary and high schools, integrating it with standards that would enhance the social and moral dimensions of schooling. The PDP was housed in two different public high schools and functioned throughout two years. It combined three PD strategies: a study group, workshops and peer coaching.

## Theoretical framework

This study was guided by literature on teacher learning and professional development with a focus on in-service teachers. Specifically, it was guided by Hoban's (2002) conceptualization of teacher learning, which coincides with the ideas that other scholars and researchers have suggested for teacher learning and professional development, and by literature on teacher communities. This body of literature served as a lens through which in-service teachers' learning within a community, such as the one implemented in this study, could be analyzed and understood.

Hoban's (2002) perspective about teacher learning conforms to the understanding that no single factor is enough to explain the complexity of teacher learning. Thus, he proposes a theoretical framework to support long-term teacher learning combining personal, social, and contextual conditions, plus other factors, which need to be connected to each other. It draws together ideas from cognitive and sociocultural perspectives to promote long-term teacher learning. It also considers the complexity of teacher learning and educational change. His framework is based on the following conditions:

*A conception of teaching as an art or profession.* Teachers must develop a collection of strategies along with awareness about when to apply them after considering the distinctive contexts and changeable classroom situations. A combination of elements such as the school curriculum, and the students' response to teaching affect classroom teaching. In other words, teachers need to know what, when, and how to teach depending on the specific context in which they are teaching.

*Reflection.* Teachers rethink their practices to learn from their experiences. They realize why they teach in a certain way and direct attention to understanding "the patterns of change resulting from the dynamic interactive learning system" (Hoban, 2002, p. 62) in which they participate.

*A purpose for learning.* Teachers decide on the content for the change effort so that they feel a desire for change. The content could be the implementation of a curriculum, the development of new teaching strategies, or the design of a new assessment strategy (Hoban, 2002), standards and students' achievement (Elmore, 2002), standards-based and performance-based assessments (Falk, 2001), students' work (McDonald, 2001), teaching materials (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth (2001), and problem solving or inquiry (Stokes, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001).

*The time frame is long-term.* Changing practice entails balancing many aspects of the classroom system. Therefore, two or three years is an appropriate time for a teacher to be involved in ongoing learning experiences. As Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) state, sustained and long-term professional development is more likely to have an impact than short-term professional development.

*Community.* Teachers meet regularly and share ideas concerning their teaching practices. They can listen to different perspectives from their colleagues and gain a better understanding of

their own experiences (Little, 2003; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Arbaugh, 2003). They need to trust each other to be able to share experiences and discuss their topics for inquiry over an extended period of time. In this way "teachers theorize and discussions are generative so that new ideas are always evolving" (Hoban, 2002, p. 69).

*Action.* Teachers try out ideas in their classrooms to see what works or not. These ideas result from discussions in the community and their individual reflections. Putting ideas into action provides teachers with a real context for learning. Thus, teachers feel empowered to try new things in the classroom because of the new information they gain in the community (Henson, 2001).

*Conceptual inputs.* Although teachers acquire a deeper knowledge about their practice by reflecting on it, putting ideas into practice, and sharing ideas in community, they need new ideas to understand their practice better and contribute to discussions by making use of a variety of sources of knowledge such as research articles, books, teacher educators' views, professional journals, and professional organizations. This leads to the construction of an intellectual community (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001).

*Student feedback.* Students' ideas about the results of their teachers' change of practice are necessary. This information may be collected through student learning journals, learning portfolios, comments, and questionnaires, among other means.

*A facilitator.* Someone helping to "establish conditions for teacher learning as well as ensuring that they complement each other to provide continuity in the teacher learning process" (Hoban, 2002, p. 69) is necessary. An external consultant or a school teacher who knows "how a professional learning system works" (Hoban, 2002, p. 167) can take on the role of facilitator. Among the conditions for teacher learning are building a

non-threatening environment where teachers feel comfortable enough to express their ideas and feel their ideas are valued and important, helping to keep the group together, and serving as a critical friend who offers a different perspective (Andrews & Lewis, 2002).

In addition, the author argues that given that change takes place in the ever changing context of a school, it is influenced by the combination and interrelation of aspects such as the following: school leadership; internal and external school politics; infrastructure to support teacher learning and educational change; school context, culture and structure; and the lives and work of teachers. These act as influences, making a professional learning system difficult to establish, and making change more complex (Hoban, 2002). Therefore, teacher learning is a complex process that needs to be analyzed, taking into account the interaction of different factors and personal, social, and contextual conditions.

### Teacher professional development and teacher communities

Keeping in mind Hoban's (2002) conception of teacher learning, a PD model such as teacher communities becomes relevant for teacher learning and development. This model is supported by scholars when discussing effective professional development for teachers (See Hawley & Valli, 1999). Lieberman & Miller (2008, p. 2) define teacher communities "as ongoing groups of teachers who meet regularly for the purpose of increasing their own learning and that of their students". This definition challenges the old views about how teachers learn, positioning them as leaders of their own professional development (Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Wenger's (1998) idea of learning in communities of practice is completely relevant at this point. He states that learning occurs when members of a group have a shared purpose, and that learning is the result of social interaction among members within

the community. As members of the community are committed to the pursuit of a common purpose, they engage in activities and discussions, help each other, share information and experiences, and build relationships that allow them to learn from each other. Accordingly, Wenger's concept of community of practice supports the idea of teacher learning within teacher communities.

Teacher learning through teacher communities has been growing thanks to an increasing body of research that explains its complexity (Curry, 2008). Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth (2001) discuss the relationship between a teacher community and teacher learning. They observe that a teacher community provides teachers with intellectual renewal given that teachers' opportunities in schools for intellectual growth are scarce, and the common way of learning for them is through the one-shot event typically offered through workshops and courses (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001; Fullan, 2001), which are well-known as traditional forms of professional development to instruct teachers on the newest teaching techniques, content and methodologies selected by policy makers (Sierra-Piedrahíta, 2016). Obviously, as this study suggests, teacher communities provide teachers with a different model of learning that implies an ongoing process which stakeholders should embrace to challenge the traditional models and notions of professional development. Doing this will serve to challenge the view that teachers can become more effective and improve their practice through PD outside their schools (Lieberman & Miller, 2008), in a short period of time and without providing the conditions to support their learning.

In his discussion on professional development for teachers, Fullan (2001) states that professional development is about developing more powerful ways of learning on a daily basis and on the job. He argues that teachers need to work in professional learning communities to achieve educational change. This kind of collaborative work with their colleagues helps teachers feel empowered to make decisions about schools and students (Sierra, 2007).

Research has demonstrated the educational advantage of professional communities and their contribution to the improvement of teaching and school reform (Little, 2003). Scholars and researchers argue, for example, that when teachers are involved in professional learning communities, they can explore their teaching practice more effectively due to the dynamics of the interactions in these groups (Supovitz, 2002). They learn from their colleagues (Fullan, 2001; Ball & Cohen, 1999; Wenger, 1998). They can solve authentic problems that are related to students' learning (Hawley & Valli, 1999). They can plan together, talk about their teaching practice, agree on ways to assess their students, and offer support to each other during the change process (Usma & Frodden, 2003). They can overcome isolation in their work (Lieberman & Miller, 2008), expand their learning opportunities, and develop their professional discourse (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Teachers learn considerably as individuals through their participation in the teacher community process; they challenge classroom practices; value participating in professional dialogue and reflecting on teaching; and develop tolerance and understanding for how other teachers think and teach (Andrews & Lewis, 2002). They build community and relationships, deepen connections between theory and their beliefs and practices, support curriculum reform, engage in learning by building their knowledge base, collaborate with their peers, and reflect on their learning (Arbaugh, 2003).

One of the most common explanations researchers and scholars provide for promoting teacher communities is that teachers are able to generate knowledge of practice as they adopt an inquiry stance about their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2001; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Ball & Cohen, 1999). Teacher communities can retain teachers who might leave the profession or retire early, and they provide a meeting-place for new learning when, in schools, teachers have almost no

meeting-places for ongoing learning concerning their subject matter (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001). They transform teacher identity, given that teachers begin to see themselves as part of a larger community in which they create and learn new practices rather than using a fixed menu (Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Clearly, the benefits of teacher communities reported in the literature are numerous, and it suggests that their implementation and development within schools can improve teacher practice and translate it into student learning (Supovitz, 2002) because these are "sites and sources of teacher's learning" (McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001, p. 99). According to the literature, professional development is regarded as effective based on the effect it has on teachers' and students' learning, and teacher communities can provide a different way to think of how teachers can learn and improve their teaching (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Therefore, teacher communities, when they are created to generate teacher knowledge, challenge traditional teaching practices, offer better and fairer learning opportunities for students (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), look for answers to shared teaching problems (Little, 2003), and can be a powerful and effective strategy to foster teacher learning and development and school reform (Sierra, 2007; Supovitz, 2002; Phillips, 2003; Hollins et al., 2004).

The improvement of practice is the most common argument for creating teacher communities (Grossman, et al., 2001). However, the number of systematic studies, especially in Colombia, that examine the effects of teacher communities on teacher practice is small. Therefore, this is still one of the most important questions that need to be investigated. Understanding this will help policymakers, administrators, professional developers and teachers to know how to adequately plan, create, maintain and facilitate teacher communities for teacher learning. This study is an attempt to contribute to closing this gap in the literature.

## Methodology and Context

### Structure of the Professional Development Program

The PDP combined three strategies: a study group, workshops and peer coaching. The group was composed of nine English teachers from two high schools. We met twice a month for a period of three hours to critically analyze and discuss the English curriculum in the two schools, the English performance standards set by the Colombian government following the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and articles related to the different aspects of the curriculum in which teachers were interested or which they needed to update. Moreover, we shared ideas to implement in classes, exchanged comments with each other about ideas we were planning to carry out or tried out in classes, and shared our classroom experiences and pedagogical materials.

A series of workshops were planned and carried out in some of the group meetings. These workshops were planned based on the topics we discussed concerning different aspects of the curriculum and were done after we had discussed the readings related to those specific topics. The workshops were carried out by professors from Universidad de Antioquia who were experts in each of the aspects of the curriculum teachers were interested in or needed to update. Once teachers were provided with the information and preparation in each of the aspects of the curriculum, they worked with me, the facilitator, on unit planning in the peer coaching part of the program.

The peer coaching strategy was implemented to support teachers and accompany them as much as possible during their change process. It consisted of meetings to plan units and design lesson plans and materials, which reflected more of the new English teaching methodologies and ideas about language teaching and learning that teachers had been reading about and discussing in the study group meetings and the workshops. It also

consisted of observations to see the implementation of the units, and post-observation meetings to provide the teachers with feedback.

As the program coordinator and facilitator of the PDP, I was in charge of planning the study group meetings, of selecting readings, and providing them to teachers, as well as leading discussions in the study group in order to guide our work concerning the different aspects of the curriculum and its design. In addition, I contacted the experts who developed the workshops related to the different aspects of the curriculum. I also worked hand in hand with the teachers in the peer coaching part of the program to plan units. Afterwards, I observed teachers' lessons while implementing the units and gave them feedback to help them reflect and think of possible actions to improve future lessons.

By means of an instrumental case study, I sought to gain a deep understanding (Stake, 2000, 2005, 2006) of the complexity of teacher learning and what and how these teachers learned within the teacher community. The teacher I chose to report on this article was one of the cases I decided to study more closely as a case within the case. I selected her as the one from whom I thought I could learn the most (Stake, 2000), taking into account Stake's (2000) suggestion to select participants who vary in relation to attributes of interest, but keeping in mind that the selections are to be made for the purpose of targeting those cases that are most accessible and can provide richer information to learn about the case more deeply (Stake, 2000).

Through an interview with the principal and some documents about the school he provided, I learned about the institution and the students. The school where the teacher examined in this study worked had a population of 1,750 students. Most of them belonged to socioeconomic strata 1 and 2 and came from an area where an armed conflict in the city had taken place for years. About 30 percent of the students lived with their mothers

and the rest with both of their parents in very poor conditions, which limited their access to resources for basic living. They were normally stigmatized as having short-term goals in life and wanting to get things effortlessly. Sometimes they endured aggressiveness at home and brought that aggressiveness to the institution in the form of threats to their schoolmates and teachers.

### The teacher

At the time of the study, Marcela<sup>1</sup> was a fifty-five-year-old married woman with a teaching degree in English and Spanish who had been teaching English at the school for over twenty years. Her weekly workload consisted of teaching seven groups of 45 students with whom she used a grammar-based approach. She was always very committed to the work in all the components of the PDP. She was kind, disciplined, responsible, honest, committed, and eager to improve her teaching. However, as the observations might suggest, she tended to be a perfectionist and felt frustrated and disappointed whenever she could not accomplish her goals. She lost patience easily with her students and had the tendency to give up when she could not control the situation. Besides that, her personal problems caused her stress, which often affected her practice and her relationship with the students.

### Data collection

To collect data I conducted two semi-structured interviews, one in the middle of the process and another at the end to learn the teachers' opinions concerning their learning process and the PDP. Besides, I conducted six class observations during the study, lasting between 40 and 50 minutes each, to see the changes in the teachers' practices and what else they had been gaining. Due to alterations in school schedules and activities, I could not observe teachers as much as I wanted. To record the observations, I followed Merriam's (1998) suggestions on what to pay attention to in an observation, and

designed my own observation protocol, which included the date, time, place, number of students, gender, purpose of the observation, descriptions of the setting, students, activities and interactions, direct quotations, and observer comments, such as feelings and initial interpretations, among other things. Moreover, I recorded 14 planning and feedback meetings held in the peer coaching part of the program and 20 study group meetings to understand how teachers were changing their way of thinking about their own practice, how they were incorporating the ideas discussed in the different parts of the PDP into their teaching, and their individual experiences of the change process. Finally, I collected the teachers' units and pedagogical materials in the middle and at the end of the year, but only when they were created by the teachers themselves without my guidance to see how they were incorporating new ideas into their teaching.

### Data analysis

To analyze the data, I used a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. For the deductive approach, I made use of concepts related to teacher learning and development, and the theoretical framework that guided this study, which provided some categories and themes. For the inductive approach, I followed the data analysis procedures of Burnaford, Fischer and Hobson (2001) and Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994). I read all sources of data several times, highlighted the passages relevant to the research questions, and compared and contrasted categories to look for relationships among them and draw some preliminary interpretations. To ensure the validity or trustworthiness of these interpretations, I triangulated the different sources of data and did member checking by sharing the findings with the teachers (Stake, 2006).

### Findings

Marcela experienced changes in her teaching practice related to patterns of teaching behavior and teaching methodology. However, there were some aspects of these two components that she changed

<sup>1</sup> Real names were changed to maintain anonymity.



only to a limited extent. Moreover, she underwent some difficulties with her students and with some contextual factors as explained below.

### Changes in patterns of teaching behavior

Various patterns of teaching behavior characterized Marcela's practice at the beginning of the process. As stated above, she was always very committed to teaching and any work associated with it. She was very disciplined and responsible in preparing her lessons, committed to the school, and eager to learn to improve her teaching. However, many times she lost her patience easily and became angry at students when they did not pay attention to her or were noisy. She also tended to ignore those students who were noisy or unruly in class, even if they were willing to participate, which sometimes discouraged them and caused them lose motivation. In addition, because of money issues and school regulations on materials, she rarely provided students with handouts for class, and when she did, they were not permitted to write on them, which forced them to write everything in their notebooks to be able to do any class activity or review content. She almost never spoke English in class and always translated to Spanish the few words or sentences she said or wrote in English. Finally, it was hard for her to value her students' work, even if they successfully focused on working on the assigned activities, and especially if such students were those already stigmatized by teachers in the school as unruly.

Once Marcela got involved in the teacher community, she became more patient and understanding with the students and willing to dialogue with them because she came to understand that there were reasons for their lack of concentration and participation in class. As she herself stated:

Before, I used to be rather indifferent towards the students, or I would yell at them all the time. . . . I used to get very mad at them when I saw that they weren't doing things the way they were supposed to. But now I try to be more patient, to dialogue with them, to see that if they aren't paying attention or doing their work

it's because something is going on with them, and I have to find out what it is. So, I think I have improved in how I treat my students. . . . I try to keep up a good relationship with them, to dialogue with them, to be more patient. (Interview 3)

Moreover, she stopped ignoring unruly students and paid more attention to them, gaining more control or authority over them. She also began to allow the students to keep the handouts they needed for the class so they could study and review the content taught that day at home, while also advising students on the importance of taking care of their class materials for future use. In addition, she started to speak English in class. For instance, she greeted the students in English at the beginning of the class, taught them how to pronounce words, and encouraged and pushed them to speak English every time they participated in class. Finally, she praised students in class every time they said a sentence correctly or did something well. This indicates that she became more flexible and understood that such flexibility could encourage students to participate in class and put more effort into learning. The following excerpt from a feedback meeting after an observation illustrates this.

Facilitator: ...OK. Another thing that I think was good was that you were praising students a lot because of their participation...and I saw some girls who were smiling because they were like happy [because] you told them "very good" and immediately I saw their happy faces like saying "the teacher praised me".

Marcela: They love it when you tell them "excellent"... and they see that they can learn. (Planning and feedback meeting 6)

### Changes in teaching methodology

Marcela started the process in our teacher community very afraid of the challenge, but very enthusiastic and positive about what her participation in this program could bring to her; she was at a point in her career in which she wanted to retire as she felt she did not have anything else to offer her students. She was tired, lacking motivation to teach, and desperate. In a study group meeting a

few months after our work began, she expressed how she felt before and what she had gained so far in our community:

What I have gained is confidence, self-esteem, and motivation. Before joining this [community] I was completely unmotivated. I was counting the years to retire, and I used to say, "I won't be able to finish" Going to the school was like a torture for me. I used to say, "My God, I can't deal with this anymore...and now, we are implementing this [curriculum].... Then, what I have gained is that I feel better. Before, when I went to the classroom, the students didn't even look at me.... Now, they say hello to me, and they even say hello in English...and they repeat parts of the dialogues [that I brought to class]. So those are things that make me feel very good. I feel more tired and my feet hurt and all that, but I prefer this and feel this wellbeing because in the classroom I am someone and before I was not important at all (Study group meeting 7).

Once Marcela began the process in the community she realized that she was not teaching her students much and came to believe that implementing the ideas proposed in the PDP was possible. She also started to change her attitude concerning her role as teacher, which at the beginning was that of a teacher who did not see the responsibility she had in motivating her students to learn and all the things she could do for her students that could have a big influence on the way they perceived their English class, as she expressed it:

[I see] a change in my attitude concerning my role as a teacher with my students. Before, I went to the classroom and taught; I didn't care if students learned or not. [Now], I see the responsibility that I have in their learning...that I have to go slow to see that they really learned. What was important [for me] before was to teach some topics even if the students didn't learn about them. I realize now that what is important is that students learn something from a topic, even if it is a small thing. (Interview 3)

Realizing all this led Marcela to develop positive feelings about herself as a teacher and about changing her methodology. For instance, she started to work with projects in her classes, integrated all language skills in her lessons and presented more meaningful topics and activities to students. She also realized that she had been

focusing solely on teaching grammar and reading, so she started to include listening activities in her classes. The following exchange between the teacher and I in a study group meeting shows this change. We were discussing a reading about how to teach listening, and she made the connection about what she had done in her classes and the content of the article.

Marcela: I did this activity only once and I did it without thinking about what I was doing. But I think in the pre-listening I did the warm-up, I introduced vocabulary, told the students about [what] the listening [was about], and in the post-listening I checked the answers.

Facilitator: What did you do for the while-listening task? What was your task about?

Marcela: Ah...listening for meaning...it was a questionnaire in which they had to write answers, choose the answers. [It was] specific information about vacations. (Study group meeting 9)

However, the success of Marcela's change of practice turned around in the middle of the process, reverting for some months because she encountered some difficulties with her students. They reacted very angrily to her demands concerning the new methodology, to the point where she received a written threat. The angry reaction of the student who threatened her affected her relationship with most of the students, and all the positive feelings she had developed started to fade. She went through a period of negativism, felt stressed, and lost her motivation to implement the new methodology, arguing that teaching something that is not reading comprehension and grammar was impossible in public schools.

We all know that in public schools we have always taught like this. That is, we only teach reading comprehension more than anything else. [This is] in public schools because there are bilingual schools where they can develop the [four] skills and people learn to communicate in English. But in these schools they don't. I see now that this is impossible [here]. (planning and feedback meeting 9)

The period of negativism was also caused by some personal problems Marcela was experiencing at home, which made her feel stressed and at times irascible, even to the point that she did not let me observe her classes anymore. As I could no longer give her feedback based on observations, I gave her some space to calm down and reduced our meetings. We did, however, continue to meet to discuss the units and lessons she had begun to plan on her own, so I could give her feedback on those. In the meetings we also discussed what was happening in her personal life, and I learned that she was going through a very difficult economic situation at home, which led me to understand why it had become so easy for her students' problematic behaviors to affect her more than usual.

The meetings we continued to have also gave us the opportunity to analyze the possible reasons why her students reacted negatively to her new methodology. Although Marcela thought about abandoning it and going back to the old one, she did not. Instead, we agreed on reducing the amount of speaking and listening activities per unit because they seemed to be the cause of her problems with the students, as they were not prepared enough to respond to these demands. Marcela thus understood that she wanted her students to change immediately and had not realized that change takes time and that her students needed more time to adjust.

Well, to me...[implementing the new methodology] was very difficult because I had to abandon all what I did before in order to do other things, and instead of doing it following some steps and doing it slow, I tried to do all at once. Then, that caused me a lot of problems with my students because they were not used to work in that way and they started to see me like a villain.... I was so obsessed about what I wanted to do that I was forcing them to work in that way. So, I started to have a lot of problems, and I don't know if you know, but I received a very aggressive threat. (Study group meeting 18)

Recognizing this helped Marcela to become more flexible and understanding towards her students, thus improving her relationship with them. However, although she recovered the good

relationship she had developed with her students, she felt disappointed with herself for not being able to accomplish her purpose after all the effort and time we had invested in changing her current teaching situation. She understood, though, that there were other factors that affected what she wanted to achieve.

I lived very ugly moments, I went to the classroom and students looked to the other side [and] they turned their backs. I talked and nobody was listening, but it was because of the very aggressive way I wanted to implement that [methodology]. So, I began to be patient again, trying to be sweet, [because] I had become very demanding.... So I attracted them again and ended up in a good relationship with them. However, concerning my feelings, I wasn't happy because I couldn't achieve what I wanted to achieve. But I also realized that doing that was impossible, that I couldn't do in two months something that we haven't done in years. That this is a process and we have to start well from the first grades ... there are many factors [to consider]. (Study group meeting 18)

Although Marcela's change in methodology was possible because she began to change many aspects related to her pedagogical knowledge and patterns of teaching behavior, there were also some aspects of these two components that she changed only to a limited extent, and that prevented her from having a more successful change process.

#### *Pedagogical knowledge influencing teacher change*

One of the limitations in Marcela's improvement was in terms of classrooms management strategies. She expected students to actively participate in class without her having to do much to involve them and without having to exercise any classroom management strategy. She wanted them to be quiet all the time, listening to her attentively, and did not think of her responsibility in involving them in the instruction that was taking place.

Then, when her difficult period described above came, she gave up implementing classroom management strategies altogether. Although she always recognized that she lacked the capacity to do so

and that it was possible that her personality interfered with her ability to inspire respect, at the same time, she did not take much action during the process to change this situation, which presented her with problems when she wanted to put the new methodology into practice. Additionally, her lack of patience towards the students also affected her ability to implement effective classroom management strategies, and when the students did not respond in the way she expected, she lost her patience easily, as illustrated below:

I wanted to have them all there, like paying attention to me, looking at me and listening to me, and I couldn't because they talk too much, [they] chat.... I don't know, maybe there is something I don't have, I don't know what it is.... I wanted them to listen to me all the time, paying attention and all that. Then that affected me a lot because I lost my patience when I saw that they didn't do what I said. (Interview 3)

*Patterns of teaching behavior influencing teacher change*

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Marcela was very reluctant to accept what she was not doing as a teacher in managing her students' behavior. To aggravate the situation, she often expressed a very negative view of the students and argued that they were not interested in learning. She often blamed them for what went wrong in class, but did not reflect on how much responsibility she, as the teacher, had in what was happening. Furthermore, she was not willing to incorporate activities the students liked and that motivated them into her class. In several conversations with her, I pointed out that one of the reasons why students might not be paying attention in class could be that they were not interested in the activities she brought to class. However, in those instances her most common response was to blame them. When I finally persuaded her to try out different activities, she expressed doubt that they would work and, afterwards, disappointment in the way those activities resulted, arguing that teaching her students was very difficult and that they were very apathetic.

It's very difficult for me to teach these students because ... sometimes I feel alone in the classroom. I look and

see that they're doing other things... and there are some groups that are still interested, but most of the students are there with their cell phones, not caring, with those haircuts that don't even let you see their eyes. (Interview 2)

However, Marcela's deficiencies in terms of pedagogical knowledge and appropriate patterns of teaching behavior were not the only issues that affected her change process; several contextual aspects also negatively influenced it.

*Contextual problems influencing teacher change*

*Class interruptions*

When Marcela was teaching her classes, many different sorts of interruptions occurred. In a fifty-minute class, it was common to have three or more interruptions such as all sorts of announcements over the classroom speakers, teachers, discipline coordinators or parents coming to the classroom to speak with the teacher or looking for students and so on, that caused valuable class time to be wasted when it could have been used more efficiently. Such interruptions were often unwarranted and always affected what Marcela had planned to achieve in her classes. The quote below from an observation illustrates one such interruption:

There is another interruption through the classroom speakers. This time asking the coordinators of grades 9-2 and 10-4 to take the attendance list to the coordinator's office.... The teacher has to abandon the activity she was doing to concentrate on the attendance list.... (Observation 2)

*Government regulations*

Two particular government regulations significantly affected what Marcela could achieve with her students (See Law 115 of 1994, and Decrees 230 and 3055 of 2002). One of them merged English and Spanish into one subject area. Thus, even if students failed the English class they could pass the subject area only by passing the Spanish class, which allowed them to do nothing in class and put no effort into learning English. The

other regulation was that students could fail three courses and still pass the year only by attending some remedial classes at the end of the year. Marcela often complained about these issues because they affected what she wanted to accomplish in her classes.

*Lack of resources and materials*

Marcela did not have resources and materials available at the school library to support her methodological change; she had to rely on the materials that I shared with her to teach her classes in a different way. In a feedback meeting, we talked about this issue.

Facilitator: ...You told me [before] that you didn't have [any] listening [material].... Do you have any videos [at the school]?

Marcela: ...We don't have [anything]. (planning and feedback meeting 1)

*Missing classes*

Classes were constantly missed due to a wide range of activities organized by the school administration, which did not allow students to have continuity in their instructional content, causing them to forget what they were taught. Moreover, Marcela had to reduce the amount of activities we had planned for a unit to be able to bring it to closure and assess students before the next school term began. Many days could pass between one class and the next before she was able to teach her students again. For instance, on one occasion, almost two months passed before she was able to work with a video that we had planned to use in one of her classes because she had to work on something else. I asked her about how the activity went, and she answered:

Marcela: I haven't done [the listening exercise]... I had to stop what I was teaching because the school term exams came, and the training for the state standardized tests came, and after that we had to do the remedial classes for that school term...and so I had to go in a different direction. (Planning and feedback meeting 7)

*Student threats and aggressive responses to the teacher*

Threats and aggressive responses from the students affected Marcela's desire and motivation to change her classes. When she pushed students too hard to work in a different way, they became aggressive, to the point where a student sent her a written threat. At that point, Marcela was afraid for her life and decided not to continue with the change in methodology. The fact that students came from neighborhoods where violence is a common way to solve problems scared her to death, as she expressed it during a study group meeting:

Well, I said "I can't continue like this because I don't want to be killed". If they were able to send me this [threat], you never know if they were serious about it. (Study group meeting 18)

*A traditional methodology at the school*

The fact that all students at the school were taught English primarily through grammar and reading exercises made Marcela's change in methodology more difficult. Her good intentions were frustrated as students did not accept the new methodology easily because it was easier for them to do their work and get good grades with the old one. She believed that if all teachers at the school could change their methodology starting from six grade students would see the new one in a different way, particularly in developing oral skills.

**Discussion**

This study reveals several important contributions that a professional development program of this kind can offer to in-service teachers to enhance their learning. In this sense, various important features of the program as discussed by the authors presented in the theoretical framework had a powerful influence on Marcela's learning, thus helping her to become more effective.

### PDP conditions influencing teacher

As the results of the study show, Marcela developed knowledge and skills that allowed her to change her teaching practice thanks to the teacher community. The discussions she engaged in with the members of the community, the sharing of ideas and experiences, and the support she got from colleagues and the facilitator allowed her to make the changes she made in her teaching (Wenger, 1998; Hoban, 2002). She was able to understand those elements of her teaching that were affecting her work with her students, and modified her practice accordingly (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Hoban, 2002; Giraldo, 2014), albeit with some difficulties.

This understanding came with the capacity to reflect on her practice which she developed through the program, and enabled her to rethink her practice and learn from her experiences. In this sense, she understood what, when, and how to teach after considering her specific teaching context (Hoban, 2002), and after realizing why she was teaching the way she was teaching. She took actions to change her practices (Hoban, 2002; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Giraldo, 2014). Those actions consisted of trying out ideas in her classroom to see what worked or not for the benefit of her students. Such ideas, of course, were generated from her individual reflection, and discussions in the community (Hoban, 2002).

Marcela's change of practice was also possible because the community had a shared purpose for learning (Hoban, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Although the facilitator proposed that teachers work on curriculum design, it was the teachers themselves who decided on those aspects of the curriculum they wanted to study based on their needs and interests. Therefore, teachers had the possibility of deciding for themselves on the content for the change effort and felt a desire to change (Hoban, 2002).

Meeting regularly in a community gave Marcela, as stated above, the opportunity to share ideas concerning her teaching practice, listen to different

perspectives from her colleagues, and gain a better understanding of her own experiences (Hoban, 2002; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001; Little, 2003; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Arbaugh, 2003; King & Murata, 2002). However, the conceptual inputs she received were fundamental in her learning process. The readings that we discussed along the process provided her with new ideas to understand her practice better and contribute to the discussions in the community. The variety of sources of knowledge such as articles, books, teacher educators' views, and professional journals (Hoban, 2002; Giraldo, 2014) that she could explore helped her to increase her subject matter and pedagogical knowledge (Borko & Putnam, 1996).

In addition, the predominant role the facilitator played was fundamental in Marcela's learning process (Giraldo, 2014). The facilitator worked to create conditions for teacher learning and ensured that those conditions complemented each other in order to give continuity to the teachers' learning process (Hoban, 2002). She organized the work in the community, negotiated and provided incentives for teachers with the principal and coordinators in the school, and designed a professional development program that could foster teachers' learning and development.

Finally, as with the other conditions discussed above, the long time frame of the program made it possible for this teacher to be involved in continuing learning experiences and changing her practice by balancing many aspects of the classroom system (Hoban, 2002). During the first year in which this study was carried out, Marcela was able to develop certain knowledge, skills, and patterns of teaching behavior that helped her to improve her practice. However, the study ended when she began to feel more confident about what she was learning and began to demonstrate all that she had learned during that year. In the second year of the PDP, I continued observing Marcela's progress, which led me to conclude that a long-term PDP is necessary to foster teachers' learning and changes

in teaching practice (Hoban, 2002), ultimately demonstrating that sustained and long-term professional development is more likely to have an impact on teacher practices (Garet, et al., 2001).

**Factors influencing teacher change**

The change process that Marcela went through was influenced, largely, by the combination of many change frames within the context of the school making her change process more complex (Hoban, 2002). Although she had a strong desire to change and was able to change her practice because she changed her vision of what teaching English should be and required from her, contextual and personal factors strongly influenced her process, reducing the initially strong desire to change.

*Teachers' lives and their work*

Marcela was very receptive to change at the beginning of the process. However, in the middle, when she went through her period of crisis, she became less receptive to it. She thought that, given that she was about to retire, it was very late to change her practice. It eventually became clear that her desire to disengage from her investment in her work, because of her frustrated ambitions (Huberman, 1989; 1995; Day, 2008) concerning the implementation of her new methodology, had grown significantly. Moreover, not being willing to use more effective strategies to manage her students' behavior or carry out activities to motivate them to learn might have also been related to the fact that she was in that stage of her career when she felt it was not important to change because of her imminent retirement. Thus, Marcela's patterns of teaching behavior seemed to be strongly related to her career stage.

*Contextual factors*

Some contextual factors at the school negatively influenced Marcela's change process (Hoban, 2002). They reflected the shared beliefs and values that define the school culture (Hoban, 2002). For instance, the majority of English teachers

believed that the best way to teach English was through reading and grammar. They also believed that it is perfectly appropriate to interrupt teachers' classes. Missing classes to carry out unrelated school activities was regarded as natural and necessary by administrators. These practices have been followed at schools for so many years that they are considered both right and important by most stakeholders involved in that school culture.

Another negative influence on the process was students' threats or aggressive responses when Marcela tried to modify her methodology. The context her students came from tended to have a negative influence on the way they behaved at school because, in such situations, students transfer what they live in their neighborhoods to the context of the school (Hoban, 2002), which interferes with their learning process as evidenced in this study.

Internal and external school politics also affected Marcela's change process (Hoban, 2002). As the study shows, government regulations such as the merging of English and Spanish into one subject area, and students being allowed to fail three courses and still pass the year, interfered with what she wanted to achieve with her students. Finally, concerning school leadership, Marcela could not count on the necessary resources and material to implement the new methodology, which clearly interfered with her intention and desire to change (Hoban, 2002). In Marcela's school the principal seemed not to be aware of the importance of providing teachers with the necessary resources and materials to teach their classes and as consequence, money was not invested to support teaching.

*Personal factors influencing teacher change*

As Marcela was going through her learning and change process, some personal factors affected her (Fessler, 1995, Hoban, 2002). Serious economic problems at home affected her performance as a teacher and her relationship with the students. Her

critical period began exactly when her economic problems were aggravated. She became easily irritable and impatient because she was worried about her economic situation, as was concluded during our feedback and planning meetings. Marcela's personality also had a strong influence on her change effort (Richardson & Placier, 2002). The attitude she assumed along her change process was widely marked by her personality. She exhibited strong perfectionist tendencies, and when she could not handle a difficult situation she wanted to give up, as when her critical period arose. Marcela was always very committed to everything she did; however, she could not see that being a perfectionist was interfering with her change process because she could not recognize the positive things she was doing in her classes, and instead felt she had failed in her process. Moreover, being a shy person and having many fears about her abilities frightened and prevented her from trying out new things because it would take her out of her comfort zone.

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### Implications of the study

The results of this study may be particularly significant in Colombia due to the kind of learning to which most in-service teachers have been and are exposed, although there have been programs at the school and university level in which teachers have been offered a different type of professional development (e.g. Cadavid, Quinchía & Díaz 2009; Sierra 2007; Usma & Frodden, 2003; Giraldo, 2014; Chaves & Guapacha, 2016; as cited in Sierra-Piedrahíta, 2016). Nevertheless, most professional development offered to teachers still consists of one-shot workshops, lectures or courses, i.e. the same old models that do not contribute much to their learning. Therefore, their teaching practices and beliefs about teaching do not change (Sierra-Piedrahíta, 2016). In addition, teachers are not presented with the possibility of putting what they learned into practice and reflecting on the experience in the company of their colleagues, and they are left alone in their classrooms after attending workshops, courses or lectures without the support of any facilitator

or mentor who can help them implement their new knowledge. Thus, the needs of teachers are left to their own responsibility, which has consequences for their motivation and commitment towards the profession and their work.

Given all this, the results of this study provide several implications for the design and implementation of professional development programs. Among in-service teachers there is clearly a need to learn more about the subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge and skills necessary to teach English. Moreover, there is a need to prepare these teachers in a way that helps them develop the right patterns of teaching behavior needed to teach their students appropriately. Working on these three components may prepare in-service teachers to change their teaching practices and teach their students in a way that helps them make important connections between language and the world around them in a meaningful way for them. Additionally, in-service teachers need to update and improve their teaching methodologies so that students in public schools do not conceive the learning of English as something boring and unimportant. Designing and implementing professional development programs that offer these possibilities to teachers are paramount. Such programs should be structured in a way that provides in-service teachers with the knowledge, skills and new patterns of teaching behavior they need to carry out more effective work with their students. Doing this may help teachers to avoid interferences in their change process caused by their lack of knowledge, skills, and patterns of teaching behavior.

This study also provides evidence of the strong effect that contextual and personal factors play in a teacher's desire to change practices and how discouraging they can potentially be for them. In this vein, it suggests that, when working with in-service teachers in professional development programs, facilitators should pay close attention to how these factors influence teacher change, and look for ways to overcome those situations that might



arrive and that often have a strong negative effect on teacher motivation. Even teachers with the best of intentions and desires get discouraged by the many intricacies that contextual factors bring into play. Thus, administrators at schools who encourage and support change need to provide teachers with the best possible conditions by taking action to change those contextual factors that can hinder teacher change. There are certainly many aspects of a school's culture that can be changed simply with the right disposition on the part of stakeholders, but to be successful, they may need administrators to promote such changes.

Last, but not least, this study illustrates the significant role that the facilitator can play in accompanying teachers throughout their learning process as they try to implement new changes in their classrooms, thus stimulating their learning and development. It supports the idea that a professional development program that only provides teachers with subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge is not enough and does not have the same results in a teacher's change of practice as a program that supports teachers in their actual classrooms. Accordingly, facilitators should help teachers along their learning process by working hand in hand with them to plan units and lessons together, modelling classes for them, observing their classes, and providing them with feedback. This then enables the teachers to improve their practice, organize their work effectively, put theory and ideas into practice, and share experiences, discuss readings, and build a good work atmosphere with their fellow teachers, among other aspects.

## Conclusions

In times when traditional professional development initiatives have been continuously critiqued for contributing too little to the learning and development of teachers, this study adds to the work of the many researchers and scholars who advocate and promote teacher communities that are

school-based and long-term, consider the needs and interests of teachers, and treat teachers as intellectuals who can be generators of knowledge. Furthermore, it provides evidence of important ways through which PDPs can have an impact on in-service teachers' learning. The ways in which the different components of the program made a difference in Marcela's learning and practice provide the field with important evidence about how professional development for teachers should be promoted.

This study therefore contributes to filling the gap in the research literature about professional development by showing how teachers can change their practices based on what they learn in teacher communities (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Moreover, it provides empirical evidence to support the claims that different researchers and scholars have argued concerning the characteristics of good professional development (See, for instance, Hawley & Valli, 1999)

Finally, an important contribution of this study is its demonstration of the educational advantage of a professional community for teachers and how it can contribute considerably to the improvement of teaching (Giraldo, 2014; Chaves & Guapacha, 2016; Lieberman & Miller, 2008), school reform (Little, 2003) and educational change (Fullan, 2001) because teachers develop the ability to connect theory and practice (Giraldo, 2014; Cadavid, Quinchía & Díaz 2009) and learn from their colleagues (Fullan, 2001; Ball & Cohen, 1999). Teachers can also overcome the isolation of their work (Lieberman & Miller, 2008), expand their learning opportunities, develop their professional discourse (Ball & Cohen, 1999), generate knowledge of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2001; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Ball & Cohen, 1999), manage their own learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2014; Long, 2014), and make that learning part of their weekly work at school (Long, 2014). Furthermore, they critically inquire about their practice, and deeply understand teaching

and learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2014). In this study it was found that learning communities make it possible for teachers to plan together, talk about their teaching practice, and offer support to each other during the change process as well. Therefore, these communities are both spaces and sources of teacher learning (McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001).

The field of teacher learning and professional development in Colombia will not advance unless teachers are offered better opportunities for professional learning and development that are planned according to their needs, interests (Chaves & Guapacha, 2016; Sierra-Piedrahíta, 2016), and working contexts and conditions (Sierra-Piedrahíta, 2016). This, of course, requires a different view of PD on the part of reformers and teachers alike, and that they recognize that, to acquire new knowledge, develop curricula, design and refine lessons, among other aspects, in-service teachers need continuous professional development within the context of learning communities to achieve the goal of preparing students to meet the new academic demands set by the government (Reutzel & Clark, 2014) and to be able to integrate these demands with the social and moral dimensions of schooling. Hopefully, this study can provide ideas on how teachers' learning and development can be fostered for the advancement of the profession and the improvement of the language education field.

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