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Exploring learning spaces that facilitate Consumer Studies teachers' engagement in Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) activities in one district in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Continuous professional development (CPD) is critical for enabling teachers to respond effectively to curriculum reforms and the demands of 21st-century education. In South Africa, Consumer Studies is a dynamic, multidisciplinary subject that requires teachers to remain current on evolving consumer issues, legislation, and pedagogical practices. Framed by the theory of Communities of Practice (CoPs), this study explored the learning spaces utilised by Consumer Studies teachers to engage in Teacher Learning Community (TLC) activities. A qualitative interpretive case study design was employed, involving ten purposively selected teachers from secondary schools in the Pinetown district of KwaZulu-Natal. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted via WhatsApp and analysed thematically. Findings revealed that teachers participated in TLC activities primarily through departmental meetings and interactions with senior teachers, which provided collegial support and guidance. While subject-specific professional learning was constrained by teacher isolation, cross-disciplinary collaboration provided collegial support, shared resources, and opportunities to develop innovative teaching strategies. The study concludes that informal and cross-departmental learning spaces are crucial for supporting teachers' professional development when formal TLC structures are limited. It highlights the need for strengthened subject-specific TLCs to ensure sustained professional learning in Consumer Studies, contributing to both theory and practice in teacher development research.

Keywords: Consumer Studies, Teacher Learning Communities, Continuous Professional Development, Community of Practice, Collaborative Learning Spaces.

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, education plays a pivotal role in preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. It is crucial for teachers to stay up to date on changes and developments in the education system. Therefore, teachers' engagement in professional learning and development programmes is essential, as it ensures that teachers are well-versed in the changes taking

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place in the subject.[1] This is beneficial because it confirms the presence of high-quality teaching and learning. Many countries have recognised the significance of continuous professional development (CPD) for enabling teachers to implement curriculum reforms, enhance their knowledge and skills, and improve learner performance.[2]

The quest for highly skilled workers in an ever-changing world creates a need for a subject that is constantly evolving to incorporate global issues and reflect up-to-date information on consumers, such as changing consumer laws.[3] Therefore, continuous professional development for Consumer Studies teachers is crucial to ensure they remain abreast of new research and developments in the subject. While it is mandatory for all teachers in South Africa to engage in various training and workshops that will equip them with better knowledge of the subject matter, research revealed that Consumer Studies teachers are not adequately given the necessary professional development strategies that would make them more active in the teaching and learning of the subject.[4] Although Consumer Studies teachers need ongoing, relevant professional development aligned with 21st-century demands, meaningful opportunities for real improvement remain scarce.[5]

Shortcomings in the professional development programmes offered by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa led to a shift away from traditional approaches towards collaborative learning in communities, which are important for promoting teacher development. To promote effective professional development for teachers, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the DBE launched the *Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa 2011-2025* (ISPFTED) policy.[6] The ISPFTED aims to strengthen teacher education and professional development to enhance teaching quality. It provides a framework of learning and development opportunities designed to improve teaching and learning in South African schools. Emphasising teacher learning within communities of practice, the policy prioritises establishing Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) across all subjects to support ongoing professional growth.[7]

The article argues that Consumer Studies teachers, who teach a subject characterised by continual content changes, require ongoing professional development to maintain high teaching standards. It further emphasises the importance of creating collaborative spaces where teachers can engage in collective reflection, thereby promoting sustainable professional learning in South African schools.[8] While previous studies have demonstrated that Teacher Learning Communities can promote collaborative professional learning across various school subjects, little is known about how Consumer Studies teachers utilise these collaborative spaces to support their professional development within the South African context. Existing research has largely focused on teachers in subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Languages,[9] with limited attention given to Consumer Studies, despite the

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[1] Simphiwe Magnificent Msimango, Thokozani Isaac Mtshali, and Samuel Dumazi Khoza, "Equipping Civil Technology Teachers with Hands-On Skills and Educational Resources for Effective Teaching of Practical Lessons.," *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 9, no. 2 (2024): 341–58.

[2] Amal Alsaleh, "Professional Learning Communities for Educators' Capacity Building during COVID-19: Kuwait Educators' Successes and Challenges," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 27, no. 5 (2024): 1172–91.

[3] Department of Basic Education (DBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements: English Home Language: Foundation Phase Grades R–3* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2011).

[4] Adri Du Toit, "The Potential of the South African Consumer Studies Curriculum to Foster Indigenous Knowledge," *Journal of Consumer Sciences* 47 (2019); Adri du Toit, "Harnessing Education through Entrepreneurship in Consumer Studies to Address Youth Unemployment in South Africa.," *Journal of Consumer Sciences* 49 (2021): 1.

[5] Jennifer Feldman, "The Role of Professional Learning Communities to Support Teacher Development: A Social Practice Theory Perspective," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 1 (February 29, 2020): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n1a1668.

[6] Department of Basic Education (DBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements: English Home Language: Foundation Phase Grades R–3*.

[7] Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa: 2011–2025* (Pretoria: DHET and DBE, 2011).

[8] Anabela Dinis, "The Impact of Entrepreneurship Education on Students' Desirability and Intentions to Pursue an Entrepreneurial Career: A Study in General and Vocational Secondary Schools of Cabo Verde," *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 13, no. 1 (June 6, 2024): 34, https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-024-00382-8.

[9] Martin Karlberg and Christopher Bezzina, "The Professional Development Needs of Beginning and Experienced Teachers in Four Municipalities in Sweden," *Professional Development in Education* 48, no. 4 (August 8, 2022): 624–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1712451.

subject's continually evolving content and curriculum demands. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the learning spaces Consumer Studies teachers engage in, how these spaces facilitate professional growth, and the extent to which they support teachers in responding to changing subject knowledge and pedagogical requirements. Against this background, the study seeks to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on Consumer Studies teacher professional development by illuminating how collaborative learning opportunities support teachers' professional growth within the South African educational context. The question that guided the research was: What are the learning spaces utilised by Consumer Studies teachers to engage in TLC activities in one district in South Africa?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review commences with a description of Consumer Studies as a school subject and teacher learning communities, and then focuses on teacher engagement in learning communities within secondary schools.

The Nature of Consumer Studies as a Subject

According to the DBE, Consumer Studies is one of the subjects offered in schools that focuses on developing learners' knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to become responsible and informed consumers of food, clothing, housing, furnishings, and household equipment.[10] Consumer Studies provides opportunities for learners to embrace life, make wise purchases, and select and eat healthy foods, thereby promoting healthy living.[11] The subject provides learners with relevant knowledge and understanding of consumer decision-making, customer relations, and family finance. Mbhenyane describes Consumer Studies as a subject that is designed to develop the learner's skills, knowledge and values.[12] Consumer Studies offers various benefits for secondary school students in South Africa, helping them discover their potential and improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills.[13] Since "the consumer" and "entrepreneurship" are intertwined across all topics in the subject, the competencies underpinning Consumer Studies require learners to have practical abilities, as well as entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, to become informed and responsible consumers of goods and services. The subject's importance includes entrepreneurship and the production and marketing of quality products.[14] The subject keeps learners abreast of current consumer issues, including food and nutrition, as well as product modifications to meet consumer needs.[15]

Teachers' learning communities (TLCs)

The international literature consistently positions TLCs as collaborative professional learning structures that strengthen teacher capacity, improve learner achievement, and contribute to school improvement.[16] Although referred to by different terms, such as teacher clusters, professional learning communities, teacher networks, learning circles, and collaborative learning groups, these initiatives share a common purpose of promoting continuous professional learning through collective engagement with teaching

[10] Department of Basic Education (DBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements: English Home Language: Foundation Phase Grades R–3*.

[11] Daphnee Hui Lin Lee and Noelle Kwok Kwan Ip, "The Influence of Professional Learning Communities on Informal Teacher Leadership in a Chinese Hierarchical School Context," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 51, no. 2 (March 19, 2023): 324–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220985159.

[12] C. M. Mbhenyane, "Sustainability of Teaching Consumer Studies at Secondary Schools in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa" (University of Venda, 2019).

[13] du Toit, "Harnessing Education through Entrepreneurship in Consumer Studies to Address Youth Unemployment in South Africa."

[14] DBE. Department of Basic Education, " Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): Computer Applications Technology Grades 10–12" (Government Printing, 2011).

[15] Shengnan Liu and Hongbiao Yin, "Opening the Black Box: How Professional Learning Communities, Collective Teacher Efficacy, and Cognitive Activation Affect Students' Mathematics Achievement in Schools," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 139 (March 2024): 104443, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104443; Mbhenyane, "Sustainability of Teaching Consumer Studies at Secondary Schools in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa."

[16] Lee and Ip, "The Influence of Professional Learning Communities on Informal Teacher Leadership in a Chinese Hierarchical School Context."

practice.[17] Rather than viewing teacher development as an individual endeavour, the literature conceptualises TLCs as communities in which teachers critically reflect on instructional practices, share professional knowledge, and collaboratively solve pedagogical challenges.[18] Consequently, TLCs have increasingly been recognised as an important mechanism for supporting curriculum reform and transforming classroom practice.

The Nature of Teachers' engagement in professional learning through diverse learning spaces

Studies across different educational contexts agree that collaborative professional dialogue constitutes the foundation of effective TLCs. These studies demonstrate that regular interactions among teachers facilitate the sharing of pedagogical knowledge, instructional resources, and classroom experiences, thereby enhancing both content knowledge and teaching effectiveness.[19] For example, research conducted in Australia by Rahman found that departmental meetings enabled teachers to deepen their subject knowledge while refining their pedagogical approaches to improve classroom practice.[20] Similar findings from Kuwait indicated that subject-based collaborative meetings enhance teachers' instructional competencies and discipline-specific expertise.[21] These studies suggest that structured opportunities for professional dialogue promote reflective practice, reduce teacher isolation, and foster continuous improvement in teaching.

The literature consistently highlights experienced teachers as critical sources of professional guidance who facilitate the induction, confidence, and instructional competence of novice teachers.[22] Studies from Sweden demonstrate that collaborative school networks provide an essential support system during teachers' early years in the profession.[23] Smith and Gillespie emphasise that induction and mentoring programmes that guide and support novice teachers in their first years of teaching have always been crucial in developing sound teaching practice while also retaining teachers in the profession.[24] Research from Namibia identifies mentoring as one of the primary responsibilities of senior teachers in nurturing novice teachers' pedagogical understanding.[25] A similar view is conveyed by Chai et al., who suggest that senior teachers play a crucial role in helping novice teachers examine various aspects of teaching and in providing them with the necessary materials and resources to teach effectively.[26] Studies indicate that master teachers frequently facilitate the professional growth of their peers, aiming to improve teaching effectiveness.[27] These studies suggest that mentoring within TLCs

[17] Leonie van der Westhuizen and Donna Hannaway, "Authentic Caring in Online Professional Development for Early Childhood Teachers in South Africa," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 14, no. 1 (September 10, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/SAJCE.v14i1.1574; Meng Zhang, Allan David Walker, and Haiyan Qian, "Master Teachers as System Leaders of Professional Learning: Master Teacher Studios in China," *International Journal of Educational Management* 35, no. 7 (November 4, 2021): 1333–46, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-04-2021-0127.

[18] Rebekka Stahnke and Sigrid Blömeke, "Novice and Expert Teachers' Noticing of Classroom Management in Whole-Group and Partner Work Activities: Evidence from Teachers' Gaze and Identification of Events," *Learning and Instruction* 74 (August 2021): 101464, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2021.101464.

[19] Zengzhao Chen and Rong Chen, "Exploring the Key Influencing Factors on Teachers' Reflective Practice Skill for Sustainable Learning: A Mixed Methods Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 18 (September 15, 2022): 11630, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191811630; Karlberg and Bezzina, "The Professional Development Needs of Beginning and Experienced Teachers in Four Municipalities in Sweden."

[20] Md Anisur Rahman, "Professional Development in an Institution through the GROW Model," *Assyfa Learning Journal* 1, no. 2 (August 28, 2023): 112–21, https://doi.org/10.61650/alj.v1i2.187.

[21] Nick Kelly et al., "Co-Design for Curriculum Planning: A Model for Professional Development for High School Teachers," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 44, no. 7 (July 2019): 84–107, https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2019v44n7.6.

[22] Karlberg and Bezzina, "The Professional Development Needs of Beginning and Experienced Teachers in Four Municipalities in Sweden"; Cristine Smith and Marilyn Gillespie, "Research on Professional Development and Teacher Change: Implications for Adult Basic Education," in *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, Volume 7* (Routledge, 2023), 205–44.

[23] Dawn M. Pilotti et al., "Creating Cohesion and Collaboration in Mathematics Classrooms: Implementing Interdepartmental Professional Learning Communities to Support Students with Disabilities," *Education Sciences* 14, no. 1 (December 31, 2023): 50, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14010050.

[24] Smith and Gillespie, "Research on Professional Development and Teacher Change: Implications for Adult Basic Education."

[25] W. N. Shanyengana, "Novice Teachers' and Mentor Teachers' Perceptions towards the Namibia Novice Teachers' Induction Programme at Selected Primary Schools in the Omaheke Region" (University of Namibia, 2023).

[26] Ching Sing Chai, Yuli Rahmawati, and Morris Siu-Yung Jong, "Indonesian Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Preservice Teachers' Experiences in STEM-TPACK Design-Based Learning," *Sustainability* 12, no. 21 (October 30, 2020): 9050, https://doi.org/10.3390/su12219050.

[27] Zhang, Walker, and Qian, "Master Teachers as System Leaders of Professional Learning: Master Teacher Studios in China."

strengthens professional knowledge transfer, supports teacher retention, and builds instructional capacity across schools.

Several scholars emphasized the advantage of peer observation as a vehicle for reflective professional learning. Rather than serving an evaluative function, peer observation is widely portrayed as a collaborative process through which teachers examine classroom practices, exchange instructional strategies, and engage in constructive professional reflection. According to Alsaleh, observing colleagues' lessons enables teachers to adopt innovative teaching methods, critically evaluate the effectiveness of their own instructional approaches, and develop practical solutions to classroom challenges.[28] In Iran, Pazhoman and Sarkhosh argue that peer observation encourages teachers to reflect on the relationship between their teaching practices and learner outcomes.[29] Liu and Yin's study further demonstrates that engaging in peer observation as a means of professional development permits teachers to utilise the resources within their setting to enhance teaching and learning.[30] The literature suggests that peer observation promotes reflective practice, strengthens collegial relationships, and facilitates the continuous improvement of teaching.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the theory of Communities of Practice (CoPs).[31] This theory suggests that a CoP is formed by people who engage in collective learning in any social activity, anywhere. According to Wenger, learning in social practice consists of four components: community, practice, meaning and identity. In the current study, Consumer Studies teachers are regarded as the "community" when they meet in their learning engagements; their dialogue and sharing of knowledge during their learning communities is "practice", learning through their experiences in teaching is "meaning," and skills teachers acquire during their learning are "identity," such as what Consumer Studies teachers become after attending their TLCs.[32]

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The qualitative interpretive approach was the most suitable for the study, as it permitted us to interact with the participants face-to-face. Denzin argues that the interpretive paradigm aims to understand human experiences of the world, drawing on participants' views within the situation being studied. A qualitative case study was adopted as the research design.[33] According to Yin, the purpose of case studies is to describe how people feel about a particular situation they are currently experiencing.[34]

Participants

Denzin and Lincoln describe sampling as the selection of individuals or sources to generate data.[35] This study employed purposive and convenience sampling to select ten Consumer Studies teachers who were teaching Grades 10, 11 and 12 in ten schools.

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[28] Alsaleh, "Professional Learning Communities for Educators' Capacity Building during COVID-19: Kuwait Educators' Successes and Challenges."

[29] Hamzeh Pazhoman and Mehdi Sarkhosh, "The Relationship between Iranian English High School Teachers' Reflective Practices, Their Self-Regulation and Teaching Experience," *International Journal of Instruction* 12, no. 1 (January 3, 2019): 995–1010, https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2019.12164a.

[30] Liu and Yin, "Opening the Black Box: How Professional Learning Communities, Collective Teacher Efficacy, and Cognitive Activation Affect Students' Mathematics Achievement in Schools."

[31] J. Lave and E. Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Etienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity" (Cambridge university press, 1998).

[32] Wenger, "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity."

[33] Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

[34] Robert K Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications*, vol. 6 (sage Thousand Oaks, CA, 2018).

[35] Denzin, *The Research Act*.

Data Collection Instruments

The individual semi-structured interviews conducted via WhatsApp were used to facilitate dialogue between the researcher and the participant.[36] Individual semi-structured interviews were an appropriate way to understand Consumer Studies teachers' attitudes, perceptions, opinions, and experiences; in other words, their perspectives on their professional learning. These interviews occurred at times when participants were available, such as during tea breaks, free periods, or after school. Ten individual interviews were conducted, each consisting of one session per participant. The interviews were recorded with an audio tape and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions from individual interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, an appropriate method for understanding experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across datasets.[37] A process of open coding was used, and categories were established, reviewed and clustered into specific themes. The data were divided into units of meaning through line-by-line analysis of each passage in the transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical code of conduct was adhered to by obtaining permission from the university where the authors are based to conduct the research. Thereafter, approval was sought from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education to conduct research at 10 schools in the Pinetown district. The sample was selected from the thirty schools that offered Consumer Studies in the district. Other ethical procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were explained to the participants and adhered to throughout the study. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were referred to by pseudonyms.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings were arranged according to different themes that emerged from the analysis, and these were used to present and report the findings. The verbatim quotes were used to support Consumer Studies teachers' views on their engagement in school activities.

Sharing knowledge in departmental meetings

The findings indicated that Consumer Studies was taught by a single teacher in each school. As a result, the subject was offered under the Science or Commerce Department since there was no stand-alone Consumer Studies Department. While other teachers met as specialists in their specific departments, Consumer Studies teachers could not meet as specialists, and they were combined with Commerce or Science teachers during Departmental meetings. Teachers raised concerns that during these departmental meetings, learning in terms of subject-specific content knowledge was very limited. However, this did not hinder Consumer Studies teachers from learning in the school, as they shared and observed good practices with colleagues from other Departments.

Teachers shared information on how to conduct practical lessons in resource-constrained contexts. Engaging with other teachers during departmental meetings allowed them to learn different, innovative ways to deliver practical lessons and share resources. Linds explained how she created a demonstration video for the practical lessons. The video was posted in the WhatsApp group and shared with other teachers. Such videos were also used for classroom demonstrations. She said the following:

> *It was strenuous for me to conduct practical lessons with inadequate equipment, as I had two stoves with a large group of learners. I must say I did not do justice to the learners in evaluating the practical lessons; I only demonstrated them and shared the video via WhatsApp. Thereafter, learners had to complete written work, integrated into the practical demonstration, to be awarded a mark* (Linds).

[36] Satish Prakash Chand, "Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research: Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations, and Document Analysis," *Advances in Educational Research and Evaluation* 6, no. 1 (August 4, 2025): 303–17, https://doi.org/10.25082/AERE.2025.01.001.

[37] Chand, "Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research: Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations, and Document Analysis."

As Consumer Studies is multidisciplinary, there is integration of knowledge from other subjects such as Mathematics, Business Studies, Life Sciences and Agricultural Science. Consumer Studies teachers and senior teachers from the Commerce Department shared their practices for teaching financial literacy and business-related topics. They also shared strategies for raising funds to effectively teach practicals. In this situation, the group benefited from best practices communicated by teachers from other subjects. This is what Toko said:

> *As a Consumer Studies teacher at school, I was under the Commerce Department. I did benefit from the Commerce master teachers, as we discussed ways to fundraise and develop business plans at school. This assisted me, as my subject was demanding. requiring finances to conduct practicals. I taught Entrepreneurship with ease and integrated it with practical work, in which students conducted market research before food production* (Toko).

Participants also complained about the shortage of equipment, which hindered the effective teaching of the practical component in Consumer Studies. During departmental meetings, participants shared solutions to address challenges arising from inadequate infrastructure and equipment during practical lessons. Collaborating with other teachers who teach practical subjects led to ideas for devising strategies to raise funds for equipment. Tomby indicated that other teachers suggested ways to ask for sponsors for the kitchen from local companies and municipalities:

> *We had something in common with the teacher from Agricultural Management Practice: we both needed equipment for our practicals. The teacher told me he secured a sponsorship from the municipality to buy the necessities for his subject. I learned that I also had to ask sponsors to ensure the Consumer Studies curriculum's infrastructure and resource needs were met* (Tomby).

Teachers acknowledged the benefits of learning through the departmental heads, although they could not share subject-specific challenges that they could have discussed with Consumer Studies specialists. Engaging in departmental meetings created spaces for teachers to learn general information applicable to all. Although teachers were meeting with peers from other departments, they were pleased to have the opportunity to share the challenges they faced in Consumer Studies. Teachers also discussed ways to curb and address common challenges across subjects. Teachers found departmental meetings to be easily accessible meeting spaces. They also enjoyed the informal chats they normally had with colleagues at any time during the school day.

Collegial support and guidance from senior teachers

Senior experienced teachers in the schools were seen as a resource because they were always keen to support and guide colleagues, even though they were not Consumer Studies specialists. These teachers served as mentors to novice teachers because they had broad expertise as education professionals, even though they came from various departments, such as Science and Commerce. While the senior teachers were unfamiliar with Consumer Studies, they offered participants valuable insights, drawing on extensive expertise in teaching approaches and subject policies that the Consumer Studies teachers could grasp and incorporate into their subject. The findings suggest that this assisted teachers who were not yet grounded in teaching Consumer Studies by mentoring them on the subject's requirements. This is what Thando said:

> *Since I am a new teacher, I have been exposed to various pieces of information through meetings that have taught me what is expected of me as a Consumer Studies teacher. They gave me a thorough outline of all the necessary documents, such as the structured lesson plans provided by the province, and discussed the subject guidelines for Consumer Studies, such as the notional time per week, the number of practicals to be done per term, and the minimum number of written activities to be given to students as set by the policy document* (Thando).

Teachers indicated that meeting with experienced teachers was very beneficial because it created spaces to share general information, such as how to use examination guidelines and examination

reports. The participants explained how master teachers explained and emphasised the importance of the styles of questioning for challenging topics. They were also guided on preparing learners for examinations.

Nelly acknowledged the pivotal role played by senior teachers in ensuring curriculum coherence and assessment integrity in Consumer Studies. By providing updated practical assessment guidelines and monitoring their application in planning practical examinations across Grades 10–12, senior teachers functioned as key sources of instructional leadership. Their emphasis on the correct use of skill codes and weightings reflects a focus on standardisation, fairness, and alignment with curriculum and assessment policy. She stated:

> *Master teachers ensured that every teacher had recent practical assessment guidelines, that they were used in planning practical examinations for Grades 10-12, and that the correct skill codes with weightings were used when setting* (Nelly).

Thembi expressed her appreciation to her senior teacher, who provided information on very important learner-teacher support materials (LTSM) for Consumer Studies. She also mentioned that the senior teacher suggested she obtain a culinary dictionary because she was having trouble interpreting some recipes due to the French terminology. Thando shared the following:

> *I never knew that there was a food and nutrition dictionary; the master teacher came to my rescue. I learned that one should invest in oneself and use it to teach and learn Consumer Studies French terminology. I misinterpreted the recipe when I made spaghetti bolognese. The recipe stated "Cook pasta al dente", which meant until firm* (Thembi).

Meeting with master teachers also equipped teachers with knowledge on how to use past examination papers to prepare lessons. Sbo explained how she applied knowledge grasped from Grade 12 moderators' reports and past examination papers to compile good-quality learning materials for her learners.

> *When planning my lessons, I always referred to the NSC moderators' report from the previous year to identify areas that performed poorly, so I could address them for learners and mitigate those challenges. I ensured I used the question paper alongside the moderator's report. I was able to develop student and teacher support materials using the past NSC exam papers to teach topics and drill learners with the type of questioning that was expected for their exams* (Sbo).

Thando believed that master teachers' interventions and meetings had strongly influenced the quality of tests and examinations across the grades. Her meetings and sharing of expertise with master teachers increased her confidence and contributed to the favourable pass rates.

DISCUSSION

The literature consistently highlights departmental meetings as important spaces for collaborative professional learning, where teachers exchange ideas, instructional resources, and pedagogical experiences to strengthen classroom practice.[38] While previous studies largely portray departmental collaboration as enhancing both pedagogical and subject-specific expertise, this study reveals a more nuanced reality for Consumer Studies teachers. Although participants regularly attended departmental meetings, these interactions rarely strengthened their Consumer Studies content knowledge because they were clustered with Science or Commerce departments led by heads who lacked specialised expertise in Consumer Studies. This suggests that the effectiveness of TLCs is not determined solely by teachers' participation in collaborative structures, but by the extent to which those structures provide access to discipline-specific expertise. Consequently, collaborative learning cannot be assumed to produce equivalent professional outcomes across all subject specialisations.

[38] Liu and Yin, "Opening the Black Box: How Professional Learning Communities, Collective Teacher Efficacy, and Cognitive Activation Affect Students' Mathematics Achievement in Schools"; Million Chauraya and Karin Brodie, "Conversations in a Professional Learning Community: An Analysis of Teacher Learning Opportunities in Mathematics," *Pythagoras* 39, no. 1 (October 31, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4102/pythagoras.v39i1.363.

The findings also challenge the assumption that professional learning must occur exclusively within subject-specific communities. Although Consumer Studies teachers experienced limited opportunities to deepen specialised content knowledge, they consistently described departmental meetings as valuable spaces for acquiring transferable pedagogical practices. Through interactions with experienced Science and Commerce teachers, participants were exposed to diverse classroom management strategies, assessment approaches, learner engagement techniques, and curriculum planning practices that transcended disciplinary boundaries. This suggests that cross-disciplinary collaboration functions not merely as a substitute for subject-specific support but as a complementary form of professional learning that broadens teachers' pedagogical repertoires.[39] Rather than reproducing subject knowledge alone, TLCs facilitate the circulation of pedagogical knowledge that can be adapted, translated, and recontextualised to address the unique demands of different disciplines.

Based on Wenger's Communities of Practice, these findings indicate that learning within TLCs occurs through participation in shared professional practices rather than through subject homogeneity alone.[40] Consumer Studies teachers became legitimate participants in broader communities of practice where engagement with colleagues from other disciplines enabled them to appropriate generic teaching strategies and reconstruct them within their own instructional contexts.[41] The knowledge exchanged was, therefore, not transferred mechanically; instead, teachers actively interpreted, adapted, and integrated pedagogical practices to meet the distinctive practical and theoretical requirements of Consumer Studies.

The findings further suggest that the relationship between subject-specific and cross-disciplinary collaboration should not be conceptualised as mutually exclusive. Instead, they represent complementary dimensions of teacher professional learning that serve different developmental purposes. Subject-specific communities are essential for developing specialised disciplinary knowledge, curriculum interpretation, and pedagogical content knowledge, whereas cross-disciplinary communities cultivate broader instructional expertise, reflective practice, collaborative problem-solving, and professional identity.[42] The absence of one cannot be fully compensated for by the presence of the other. Consequently, the challenge for schools is not simply to establish more Consumer Studies-specific learning communities but to create integrated professional learning systems that intentionally combine subject-specialised support with opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

These findings have broader implications for teacher professional development beyond Consumer Studies. The literature indicates that in schools where low-enrolment subjects are staffed by only one or two teachers, establishing subject-specific departmental structures is often impractical.[43] Under such circumstances, cross-disciplinary collaboration becomes an important organisational resource for sustaining professional learning. However, its effectiveness depends on recognising that generic pedagogical knowledge and specialised disciplinary knowledge fulfill different professional functions. Teacher learning, therefore, becomes a multi-layered process in which educators simultaneously develop shared professional competencies through interdisciplinary engagement while requiring external subject-specific networks, cluster meetings, or specialist mentors to strengthen disciplinary expertise. This reconceptualises Teacher Learning Communities as interconnected learning ecosystems rather than isolated departmental structures.

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[39] Lee and Ip, "The Influence of Professional Learning Communities on Informal Teacher Leadership in a Chinese Hierarchical School Context"; Yael Segev, Sigal Hason, and Merav Hayak, "The Influence of an Online Professional Learning Community on Teacher Professional Development for Fostering a Love of Reading," *TechTrends* 70, no. 2 (April 19, 2026): 293–307, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-025-01146-1.

[40] Wenger, "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity."

[41] Kate Ferguson-Patrick, "Teachers Collaborating as a Professional Learning Network and Learning How to Implement Collaborative Problem Solving in the Primary Math's Classroom," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 6 (June 4, 2025): 701, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060701; Chauraya and Brodie, "Conversations in a Professional Learning Community: An Analysis of Teacher Learning Opportunities in Mathematics."

[42] Feldman, "The Role of Professional Learning Communities to Support Teacher Development: A Social Practice Theory Perspective."

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RECOMMENDATIONS

As a multidisciplinary subject, Consumer Studies benefits from collaboration in departmental meetings, which broadens teachers' understanding of related topics. Teachers should be made aware of how other subjects contribute to both the practical and theoretical dimensions of Consumer Studies. Collaborative syllabus planning and team-teaching across related subjects would promote integration, coherence, and more meaningful learning experiences.

The findings highlight the need to strengthen subject-specific professional learning for Consumer Studies teachers. Although departmental meetings support generic pedagogical development, they do not adequately address subject-specific content knowledge gaps. Establishing subject-focused TLCs and promoting inter-school collaboration would enable the sharing of resources, assessment practices, and strategies for managing practical components. The involvement of Consumer Studies subject specialists or trained master teachers is also recommended to enhance teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and reduce professional isolation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study shows that while Consumer Studies teachers benefit from collegial interaction within schools, opportunities for meaningful subject-specific professional learning remain limited. Geographic distance, the small number of specialists per school, and the absence of viable clusters restrict regular collaboration with other Consumer Studies teachers, thereby constraining professional growth. Nevertheless, departmental meetings and support from senior teachers provide valuable spaces for sharing general pedagogical strategies, fostering supportive relationships, and encouraging reflective practice. Strengthening structured networks that connect subject specialists across schools is therefore essential to sustain engagement in Teacher Learning Community activities and support continuous development in this dynamic subject.

Limitations

This study was limited in that the findings reflected only the views of ten teachers from ten schools in one district. Therefore, results cannot be generalised beyond this sample. Likewise, further research could shed light on the broader range of views on the learning spaces used by Consumer Studies teachers, as school-based learning is inadequate for subject-specific learning. Subsequent research could be a quantitative study involving a large number of Consumer Studies teachers from several districts, linking teacher participation in professional learning spaces to learners' practical performance, engagement, and achievement in Consumer Studies.

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