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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF TEACHERS: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND META-ANALYTICAL SYNTHESIS BASED ON PRISMA 2020

Annotation

The article presents a systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of research on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) conducted between 2010 and 2025. The relevance of the study is determined by the growing role of collaborative forms of professional development in the context of educational modernization. The aim of the study is to identify the main research directions on PLCs, assess their methodological quality, and determine the evidence-based effects of professional communities on teaching practice.

The methodological framework was based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol. Following a search in Scopus and Web of Science (n = 484), and after duplicate removal and multi-stage screening, 65 studies were included in the final analysis. The methods applied included descriptive bibliometric analysis, thematic coding, and quality appraisal of research design using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT).

The findings demonstrate a steady increase in publications after 2015, the predominance of qualitative and mixed-method designs, and a positive impact of PLCs on teachers' reflective practice, self-efficacy, and collaborative culture. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the integration of PRISMA 2020, bibliometric analysis, and MMAT within educational research. The practical significance is reflected in the application of the findings to the design of post-course professional support programs.

Keywords: professional learning communities (PLC), systematic review, PRISMA 2020, meta-analysis, communities of practice, professional development, online PLCs.

Introduction. Contemporary educational policy emphasizes the need to shift from individual forms of professional development toward models of collective professional learning. In this context, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are considered a sustainable mechanism for transforming teaching practice [1].

Conceptually, PLCs are grounded in Wenger's theory of communities of practice [2], the model of professional capital developed by Hargreaves and Fullan [3], and research on the effectiveness of professional communities [4]. Despite the substantial body of existing research, there remains a lack of a comprehensive systematic analysis of their methodological structure and evidence base over the past 15 years.

The aim of this study is to conduct a systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of publications on PLCs from 2010 to 2025 based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses).

Methods and Materials. The present study employed the PRISMA 2020 protocol to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the systematic review [5]. PRISMA includes a 27-item checklist designed to provide a comprehensive and structured description of the review methods and results. We deliberately adhered to all 27 checklist items, documenting each stage of the literature search and selection process. The use of PRISMA is justified by its broad recognition within the scientific community as a standard for systematic reviews that enhances reporting quality.

The literature search was conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection databases (as primary platforms), covering publications from 2010 to 2025 (according to database coverage dates). The search strategy was developed using relevant English-language keywords, specifically the phrases "professional learning community," "PLC," and their combinations with terms related to the educational context (e.g., "school," "teacher," "education"), connected through Boolean operators

AND/OR to broaden or refine the search. Filters were applied to restrict the language (English) and the publication period (2010–2025). Exclusion terms (e.g., “community of practice,” “massive open online course,” etc.) were also specified to eliminate related but non-relevant topics. The final search was conducted in May 2024 (covering the period 2010–2025). In accordance with PRISMA recommendations, the report provides a full description of the search strategies for each database, including the operators, filters, and restrictions used. This ensures search reproducibility and demonstrates the scope of source coverage. An example of a search query is: (“professional learning community” OR “PLC”) AND (teacher* OR school* OR education), with analogous queries adapted for Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection.

According to the PRISMA protocol, the selection process included four main stages: identification, screening, full-text assessment, and inclusion. At the identification stage, n = 484 records were retrieved. After removing duplicates, n = 320 unique records remained. During the screening stage, researchers jointly assessed relevance based on titles and abstracts, resulting in n = 120 articles selected for full-text review. Following full-text analysis, n = 65 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Study Selection Procedure According to PRISMA

Selection stage	Number (n)	Description
Identification	484	Records identified through Scopus (286) and Web of Science (198)
Duplicate removal	164	Duplicate records excluded
After duplicates removed	320	Unique records screened
Screening	320	Title and abstract screening by two independent reviewers
Excluded at screening stage	200	Irrelevant studies
Full-text assessment	120	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility
Excluded after full-text review	55	No empirical data; irrelevant object; theoretical essays
Included in final analysis	65	Studies meeting inclusion criteria

Source: Developed by the authors.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. empirical studies on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) published between 2010 and 2025;
2. context: school and teacher education;
3. publications in English;
4. availability of full text.

The exclusion criteria included:

1. non-related topics (e.g., studies outside the educational context or not addressing PLCs);
2. theoretical reviews, meta-analyses, methodological papers, or review articles without original empirical data;
3. publications prior to 2010 or outside the specified time range;
4. sources without full-text access (conference abstracts, dissertations, etc.), as well as other non-peer-reviewed materials.

Article selection was conducted by several independent reviewers. At the first stage, titles and abstracts were independently screened by two authors (blind screening), and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. At the second stage, full-text screening was also carried out independently by two researchers (in pairs), with collective discussion and, when necessary, consultation with a third colleague to resolve disagreements. Inter-rater agreement was formally assessed using Cohen’s Kappa coefficient, which in our study was approximately 0.8, indicating good agreement. Thus, a transparent selection procedure was ensured, in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (multiple independent reviewers and consensus in case of disagreement).

Data analysis of the selected publications was conducted in several stages, combining quantitative assessment of publication activity with qualitative content interpretation.

The bibliometric analysis demonstrated a steady positive trend in publication activity in the field of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Starting approximately in 2015–2016, a pronounced increase in the number of publications was observed, which intensified particularly during 2020–2022, as confirmed by the linear trend of publications from 2012 to 2022 [6]. The peak was recorded in 2022, with approximately 189 publications [7], while the average annual growth amounted to several dozen articles. These findings are consistent with recent bibliometric studies, which also highlight the rapid expansion of PLC-related research and its growing integration with digital competencies such as TPACK in higher education contexts [8].

The geographical distribution of publications reveals the dominance of North American and Asian countries. The United States is the most productive country, followed by China [2, p.86]; together, these countries account for the majority of the research output. Approximately 94% of the publications are journal articles, indicating a high level of academic institutionalization of the topic.

The regional distribution of publications can be effectively visualized using a pie chart (share by continent), while the contribution of individual countries can be represented by a bar chart (top countries). Among the most active journals are *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, *International Journal of Science Education*, *Professional Development in Education*, *Education Sciences*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, and others [9]. The concentration of publications within a limited number of specialized journals suggests the formation of a stable academic core in PLC research.

A similar concentration is observed among authors: the most productive scholars include, in particular, Chai C.S. and Koh J.H.L., who demonstrate a significant contribution to the development of this field.

Within the study, a quantitative count of publications was conducted by year, country, author, and methodological type (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies). Statistical indicators of publication dynamics and geographic distribution were calculated. The bibliometric analysis systematically identified key trends: sustained growth of interest in PLC research, geographical concentration of studies, dominance of qualitative designs, and the formation of a core group of leading journals and authors.

The results of this stage are presented in Figures 1–4, illustrating:

1. publication dynamics by year;
2. distribution of studies by country and region;
3. structure of publications by journals, authors, and methodological approaches.

Such an approach to the quantitative analysis of scientific literature is widely applied to identify research trends and allows for an objective assessment of the maturity and institutionalization of the studied field.

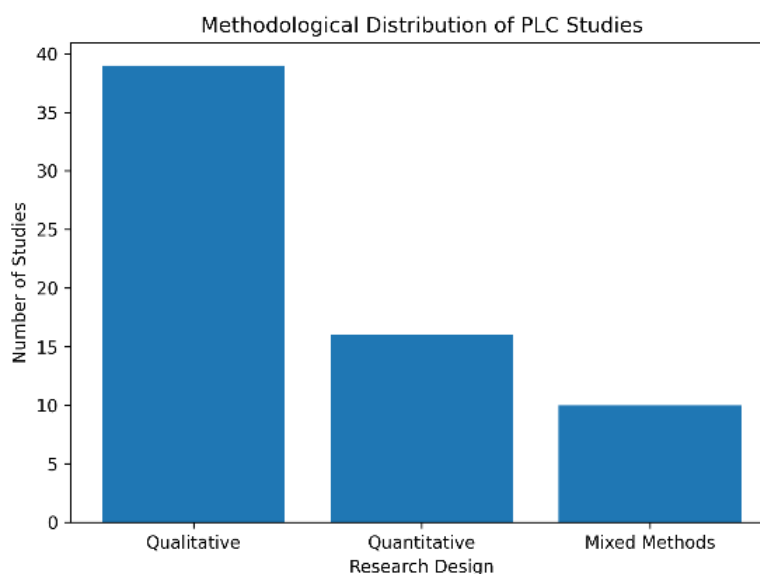


Figure 1. Methodological Distribution of PLC Studies

Source: created by the authors

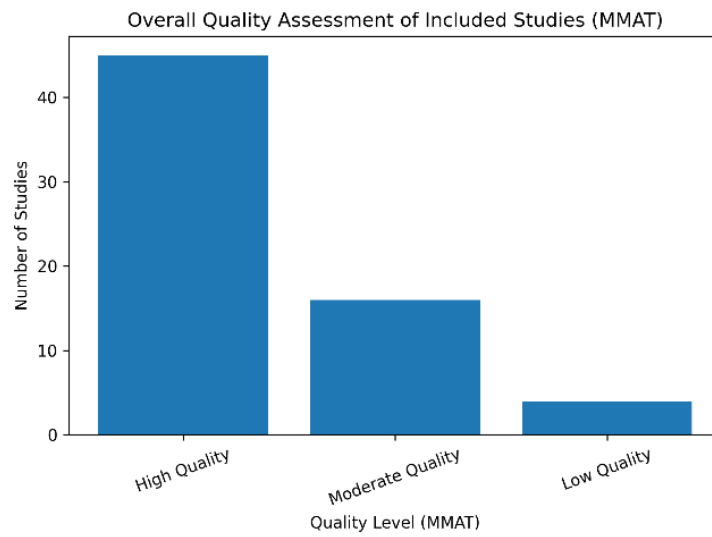


Figure 2. MMAT Quality Distribution.

Source: created by the authors

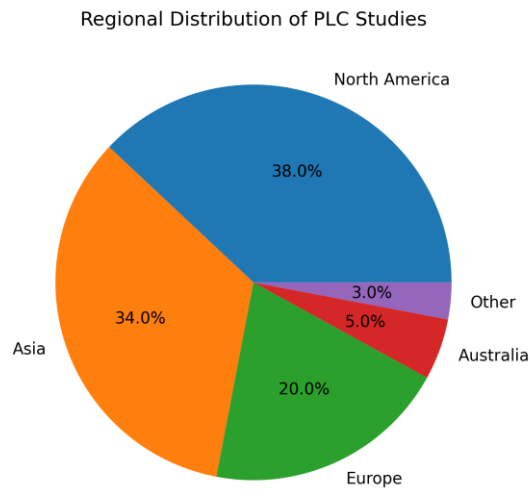


Figure 3. Regional Distribution of PLC Studies.

Source: created by the authors

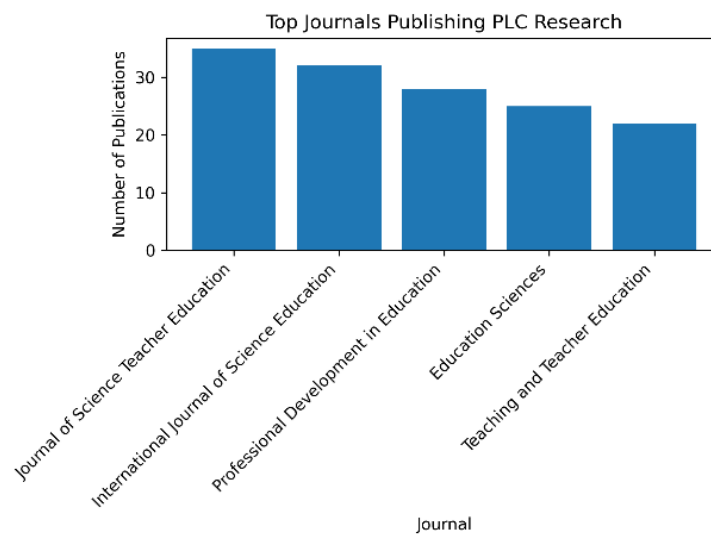


Figure 4. Leading Journals Publishing PLC Research.

Source: created by the authors

The analysis showed that PLC research is predominantly qualitative in nature: 77.4% of the studies are based on descriptive qualitative designs, 3.8% employ purely quantitative methods, and 5.7% apply mixed-method approaches. The most common research strategy is case study, along with other descriptive formats. The primary data collection methods include individual and group interviews, observation of PLC activities, document and instructional material analysis, and surveys. The combination of multiple methods reflects researchers' efforts toward methodological triangulation and comprehensive examination of teachers' professional interaction.

The theoretical foundation of PLC research is mainly grounded in the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), social capital theory, and models of continuous professional development. PLCs are viewed as sustainable forms of collective teacher learning based on shared goals, professional dialogue, and reflection [2, p.86]. Several scholars emphasize the importance of supportive organizational conditions and leadership as key factors ensuring PLC sustainability.

Thematic analysis enabled the identification of five major research directions.

1. Theoretical foundations of PLCs. PLCs are interpreted as a form of collective professional learning that fosters long-term collaboration and reflective interaction among teachers.

2. Empirical effects of PLCs. Classical reviews highlight the limited availability of rigorous evidence regarding the impact of PLCs on student outcomes [8, p.91]. However, more recent studies report positive changes in teaching practices and professional motivation, although these conclusions are largely based on qualitative data.

3. National contexts. PLCs are most extensively studied in the United States and China; significant attention is also given to Singapore and Shanghai, where PLCs are integrated into centralized educational systems. Outside the English-speaking world, research remains comparatively less extensive.

4. Online and hybrid PLCs. Since 2020, interest in digital formats of professional collaboration has increased. Studies indicate that online PLCs facilitate deeper pedagogical discussions and support adaptation to distance learning, reflecting the transformation of the traditional PLC model.

5. Evaluation methodologies of PLCs. The effectiveness of PLCs is most often assessed through qualitative data and self-reports. Controlled quantitative studies remain limited, highlighting the need for more rigorous measurement tools to evaluate PLC outcomes.

Thematic coding was conducted following the algorithm proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): open coding, grouping of codes into categories, refinement, and interpretation of themes [10]. The resulting thematic clusters reflect stable research focus and confirm the predominantly descriptive nature of the existing evidence base.

To assess the methodological rigor of the included studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT, version 2018) was applied [11]. This instrument allows for the evaluation of different research designs within a unified assessment framework. It includes two general screening questions and specific criteria for various study types: four criteria each for qualitative and quantitative designs (including randomized, quasi-experimental, and descriptive studies), and three criteria for mixed-method studies. Each study received an overall score reflecting the percentage of criteria met.

Quality appraisal was conducted independently by two experts. To enhance reliability, a preliminary calibration phase was undertaken: the reviewers jointly analyzed a pilot sample of publications to harmonize their interpretation of the criteria, after which they independently assessed the entire body of studies. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Final scores were recorded for each study and subsequently aggregated by research design type (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) for comparative analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Study Quality Assessment According to MMAT (Version 2018)

Study design type	Number of studies (n)	High quality (4–5 criteria, $\geq 80\%$)	Moderate quality (2–3 criteria, 50–79%)	Low quality (≤ 1 criterion, $< 50\%$)	Mean percentage of criteria met
Qualitative	39	28	9	2	82%

Quantitative	16	10	4	2	76%
Mixed methods	10	7	3	0	85%
Total	65	45	16	4	81% (overall mean)

Source: Pluye, P., Hong, Q. N., Bush, P. L., & Vedel, I. (2015). Mixed kinds of evidence: Synthesis designs and critical appraisal for systematic mixed studies reviews including qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies

Note. High quality indicates studies meeting 4–5 MMAT criteria ($\geq 80\%$). Moderate quality indicates 2–3 criteria (50–79%). Low quality indicates ≤ 1 criterion ($< 50\%$). Quality appraisal was conducted independently by two reviewers, with consensus resolution of discrepancies.

The results indicated that the average level of methodological compliance was 81%. The highest scores were demonstrated by mixed-method studies (85%), whereas qualitative and quantitative studies achieved average scores of 82% and 76%, respectively. High methodological quality ($\geq 80\%$) was identified in 45 out of 65 studies. At the same time, a small proportion of publications exhibited limited methodological rigor.

The distribution of quality scores reveals heterogeneity in methodological contribution. The most convincing findings are produced by studies with carefully designed research frameworks and clearly structured samples, including quasi-experimental and mixed-method studies. In contrast, descriptive case studies — despite their dominance within the sample — more frequently demonstrate moderate levels of rigor due to sampling limitations, absence of control groups, and lack of quantitative verification. This tendency is consistent with the conclusions of Vescio et al. regarding the insufficient empirical rigor of a portion of PLC research [1, p. 85].

Thus, the application of MMAT enabled a systematic assessment of the quality of the evidence base and helped identify methodological strengths and weaknesses in existing PLC research. The findings highlight the need to increase the proportion of empirically rigorous and mixed-method designs in order to strengthen the validity of conclusions about the impact of Professional Learning Communities.

Results and their discussion. The findings are consistent with previous PLC reviews. Similar to Stoll et al. (2006) and Vescio et al. (2008), we observe strong policy-level interest in PLCs alongside still limited robust evidence of their direct impact. However, our study identifies new trends: the development of online PLCs and post-COVID shifts (corresponding with evidence of PLC use to support distance learning [12]), as well as a broader geographical expansion of research. Growing activity in Asia (Singapore, China [7, p.14]) and emerging studies from Eastern Europe indicate the extension of the PLC agenda beyond traditionally dominant regions.

These findings have practical implications for designing post-course support programs and continuous professional development systems. PLCs are increasingly viewed as instruments for collaborative learning and adaptation to new educational conditions. In particular, PLCs may function as collaborative hubs for developing teachers’ digital competence in the context of digital transformation in education. The identified themes and limitations highlight the need for further development of robust PLC evaluation methodologies and adaptation of programs to diverse educational contexts.

Our analysis confirms earlier conclusions: Professional Learning Communities are considered an effective structure for teacher professional development because they promote knowledge sharing and critical reflection. As noted in the literature, PLCs “expose teachers to new ideas and practices and improve teaching by stimulating critical reflection” [13]. Our findings extend these conclusions by incorporating online and hybrid PLC formats, which have become particularly relevant after 2020. In hybrid formats, PLCs combine online and face-to-face interactions, “allowing teachers to reflect and collaborate with one another and with external experts with minimal constraints of time and place” [14]. Consequently, the positive impact of PLCs identified in this study is closely linked to the cyclical model of “planning – implementation – analysis – reflection,” whereby teachers plan instructional actions, implement them, analyze outcomes, and refine practice accordingly.

Our findings also resonate with the Kazakhstani context. As reported by Kazakhstani teachers themselves, participation in school-based PLCs enriches both teaching practice and student learning:

“participation in a school PLC can positively influence teacher practice” [13, p. 145]. This indicates that educators in Kazakhstan already perceive the benefits of collaborative lesson analysis and joint problem-solving.

Kazakhstan operates a structured national system of teacher professional development. The National Center for Professional Development “Orleu” offers modular programs delivered in face-to-face, online, and blended formats. Such flexibility enables the integration of PLC elements at all stages of teacher training. Moreover, “Orleu” provides post-course support mechanisms, which align with the cyclical PLC model by reinforcing acquired knowledge and skills through continued reflection and mentoring.

Key practical directions include:

- Integration of PLC principles into professional development programs. Teacher training courses should be designed according to the PLC model, emphasizing collaborative lesson planning and structured reflection. This operationalizes the cycle “plan – implement – analyze – reflect” in practice [13, p. 150].

- Use of online and hybrid formats. Digital platforms (e.g., the “Ustaz” platform, “Orleu” MOOCs) can serve as channels for online PLCs, enabling teachers to collaborate and exchange experiences beyond school boundaries. Such formats increase accessibility and resilience to external challenges (e.g., pandemics).

- Post-course support. After course completion, structured follow-up systems—mentoring, consultations, and online sessions—should be implemented. This strengthens the practical impact of PLCs by supporting teachers in reflecting upon and applying newly acquired practices.

Conclusion. The conducted systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of publications from 2010–2025, carried out in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 protocol, made it possible to structure the contemporary research field on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and to identify stable methodological components of effective professional communities: a shared educational mission, collective responsibility for student learning outcomes, regular collaborative reflection on teaching practice, a culture of trust, and the use of data for decision-making. The findings confirm that PLCs function not as an episodic form of methodological activity, but as an institutionally embedded model for developing a school’s professional capital by Hargreaves & Fullan, aligned with the concept of communities of practice by Wenger.

Within the framework of the present study, the meta-analytic review performs not only a synthesizing but also a design-oriented function. The systematization of the evidence base has enabled the development of a theoretical and methodological foundation for an applied model of the “intra-school professional development environment for teachers,” implemented within the research activities of the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Training. Thus, a transition is made from the analysis of international research to a contextually adapted model that takes into account the specific features of the national education system and the objectives of continuing professional development.

The establishment of a professional learning community within the Institute for Advanced Training is considered a practical validation of the meta-analytic findings. The study confirms that the sustainability of PLCs is ensured by the systemic nature of managerial decisions, the regularity of professional interaction, and integration into the organization’s strategic development framework. Accordingly, further empirical research will focus on evaluating the effectiveness of implementing the “intra-school professional development environment” model through indicators of professional collaboration, changes in teaching practices, and the dynamics of teachers’ professional capital.

Thus, the present study integrates a theoretical and methodological analysis of international PLC experience with the development and implementation of an applied professional community model, thereby ensuring both the scientific rigor and practical relevance of the ongoing research work.

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МҰҒАЛІМДЕРДІҢ КӘСІБИ ОҚУ ҚАУЫМДАСТЫҚТАРЫ: PRISMA 2020 НЕГІЗІНДЕГІ ЖҮЙЕЛІ ШОЛУ ЖӘНЕ МЕТААНАЛИТИКАЛЫҚ СИНТЕЗ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада 2010–2025 жылдар аралығында жүргізілген мұғалімдердің кәсіби оқу қауымдастықтарына (Professional Learning Communities, PLC) арналған зерттеулерге жүйелі шолу және метааналитикалық синтез ұсынылады. Зерттеудің өзектілігі білім беруді жаңғырту жағдайында кәсіби дамудың ұжымдық формаларының рөлінің артуымен айқындалады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – PLC бойынша зерттеулердің негізгі бағыттарын анықтау, олардың әдіснамалық сапасын бағалау және кәсіби қауымдастықтардың педагогикалық тәжірибеге дәлелді әсерін айқындау.

Әдіснамалық негіз ретінде PRISMA 2020 протоколы қолданылды. Scopus және Web of Science базаларында жүргізілген іздеу нәтижесінде (n = 484), қайталанатын жазбаларды алып тастау және көпсатылы іріктеу рәсімінен кейін қорытынды талдауға 65 зерттеу енгізілді. Зерттеуде дескриптивті библиометриялық талдау, тақырыптық кодтау және зерттеу дизайнының сапасын бағалау үшін Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) құралдары қолданылды.

Нәтижелер 2015 жылдан кейін жарияланымдар санының тұрақты өсуін, сапалық және аралас әдіснамалардың басымдығын, сондай-ақ PLC-тің мұғалімдердің рефлексиялық тәжірибесіне, өзіндік тиімділігіне және ынтымақтастық мәдениетіне оң ықпалын көрсетеді. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы – білім беру саласындағы метаанализде PRISMA 2020, библиометриялық талдау және MMAT құралдарын кешенді біріктіруінде. Практикалық маңыздылығы – алынған нәтижелерді посткурстық кәсіби қолдау бағдарламаларын жобалауда қолдану мүмкіндігінде.

Түйінді сөздер: мұғалімдердің кәсіби оқу қауымдастықтары (PLC), жүйелі шолу, PRISMA 2020, метаанализ, тәжірибе қауымдастықтары, кәсіби даму, онлайн кәсіби оқу қауымдастықтары.

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ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ОБУЧАЮЩИЕ СООБЩЕСТВА ПЕДАГОГОВ: СИСТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР И МЕТААНАЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ СИНТЕЗ НА ОСНОВЕ PRISMA 2020

Аннотация

В статье представлен систематический обзор и метааналитический синтез исследований, посвящённых профессиональным обучающим сообществам педагогов (Professional Learning Communities, PLC), выполненных в 2010–2025 гг. Актуальность исследования обусловлена возрастающей ролью коллективных форм профессионального развития в условиях модернизации образования. Цель работы — выявить основные направления исследований PLC, оценить их методологическое качество и определить доказательные эффекты профессиональных сообществ на педагогическую практику.

Методологической основой послужил протокол PRISMA 2020. По результатам поиска в базах Scopus и Web of Science (n = 484), после удаления дубликатов и многоэтапного отбора, в итоговый анализ включено 65 исследований. В работе применены методы дескриптивной библиометрии, тематического кодирования и оценки качества дизайна исследований с использованием инструмента Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT).

Результаты демонстрируют устойчивый рост публикационной активности после 2015 года, преобладание качественных и смешанных методологических подходов, а также положительное влияние PLC на рефлексивность педагогов, их самоэффективность и культуру профессионального сотрудничества. Научная новизна исследования заключается в интеграции протокола PRISMA 2020, библиометрического анализа и инструмента MMAT в рамках образовательного метаанализа. Практическая значимость состоит в возможности применения полученных результатов при проектировании программ посткурсового сопровождения педагогов.

Ключевые слова: профессиональные обучающие сообщества (PLC), систематический обзор, PRISMA 2020, метаанализ, сообщества практики, профессиональное развитие, онлайн-профессиональные обучающие сообщества.

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