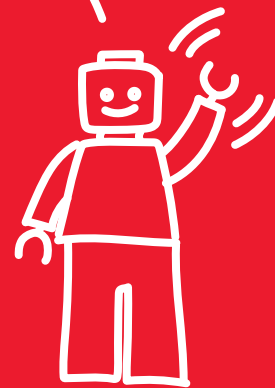# Communities of Practice Report

July 2023

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# Executive Summary

The evolving trends in education require teachers to consistently improve their knowledge and skills in order to better support their students in meeting the changing demands of society.

Government and non-governmental institutions support teachers in their professional development by offering training programs to build or reinforce skills.

Ideally, these programs aim to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and practices to effectively implement evidence-based teaching and learning methodologies. However, offering training opportunities for the teachers is not enough; there needs to be a structured follow-up to support teachers to overcome challenges experienced during implementation.

One way to do this is by creating structures for peer learning among teachers through Communities of Practice (CoPs) at the school or regional level. The CoPs provide ways of supporting peer mentorship that works alongside training and coaching.

To better understand existing practices of successful Communities of Practice (CoPs) in Kenya, Education Design Unlimited (EDU) organised a learning session with organisations in the Kenyan education sector that are running CoPs in their project interventions.

The goal of this session was to understand what works in a local context, and help strengthen the practices of the Kenyan education ecosystem with insights into what works for leading effective CoPs.

The learning session highlighted several best practices observed in successful CoPs used to build the capacity of teachers, librarians, community dance coaches and program officers working with out of school children:

1. Provide a loose structure with autonomy and flexibility that allows CoPs to self-direct their activities.
2. Offer tools such as peer observation guides and discussion materials to facilitate CoP activities.
3. Adopt a blended approach, combining in-person meetings with digital platforms like WhatsApp for information sharing.
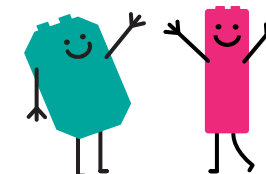
[1] A 'Learning Session' is a qualitative research method designed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge among participants conversant with a particular topic.

# Introduction

Kenya Play Project (KPLAY), a project developed and implemented by IREX, is currently at its midpoint. The project is developed with support from Humans Who Play (HWP) and Edutab, and is being carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE), Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), and The Teacher Service Commission (TSC).

KPLAY supports teachers in Kwale and Kilifi counties to adopt Learning through Play with Technology (LtPwT) practices, in alignment with Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). Although the KPLAY program includes CoPs as part of teacher professional development, their implementation has been a challenge in the initial two years of implementation.

To inform the evolution of the CoP design by IREX and HWP, KPLAY research partners EDU organised a learning session which aimed at sharing the experiences, best practices, and innovative approaches to CoP implementation, specifically with a lens to what works in the local Kenyan context. The learning session provided KPLAY with evidence-based recommendations to effectively run CoPs in the next phase of the project.

The following report provides insight into the key findings and recommendations from the learning session. Additionally, the report outlines the challenges and recommendations mentioned by the learning session participants. It also highlights CoP models designed by participants specifically to address challenges in implementing CoPs experienced in the KPLAY project.

EDU wishes to express its gratitude to the learning session participants who contributed their time and expertise through the learning session, which informed the development of this report.
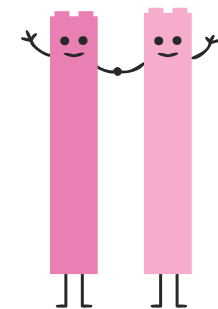
# Background : Communities of Practice in Education

Communities of Practice (CoPs), also known as Professional Learning communities (PLCs), support continuous professional development for teachers and other facilitators of learning.

CoPs often happen after training when teachers have put into practice what they have learned and can identify best practices and challenges that have been encountered during implementation.

While CoPs are seen to be the best way to sustain teacher's learning and maintain or improve learner's outcomes, they have not been fully utilised in some contexts.

In interviews and focus group discussions, teachers from Kwale and Kilifi counties who are implementing the KPLAY project mentioned that they have a basic understanding of how hey can benefit from communities of practice.

From the conversations held with the teachers, they indicated that a culture of peer learning seems to be present in the schools as demonstrated by frequent reference to how they normally learn from each other. However, the discussions with teachers illuminated several critical barriers that lead teachers not to participate in CoPs. These include:

### Heavy workload caused by a high student-teacher ratio:

Teachers mentioned that due to the large class population they are not able to participate in the CoPs as they have other competing tasks such as lesson preparation and assessing the learners.

### Low teacher and school leader motivation:

Teachers do not see the importance of participating in the CoPs, there is no inspiration from within or even from the school leadership. Teacher's varied opinions on reasons why they should be part of the CoPs contribute to low motivation.

### Low digital literacy and technological access in the school:

Teachers indicated that they rely mostly on the ICT champions to use any learning devices that are available in the school. This hinders them from participating in the CoPs that are done on online platforms such as Zoom as the ICT champions might be busy with other projects and activities. Limited digital infrastructure such as access to efficient laptops and sufficient internet connection was also mentioned as a challenge.
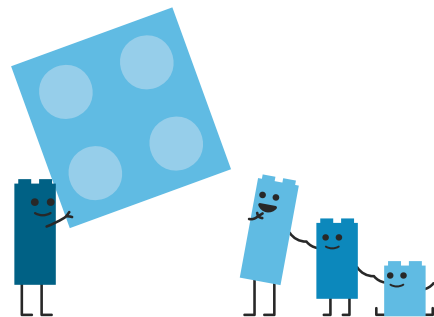
It is with this background gap that IREX and its research partner, EDU, and with support from Education Development Center (EDC), proposed a learning session to gain insights from other organizations in Kenya that are using CoPs as part of their program implementation.

Organisations that were invited to participate in this learning session included LEGO-funded organisations and organisations renowened as leaders in teacher professional development in Kenya.

They included IREX, Edutab, Aga Khan Foundation, Book Bunk, Save the Children, Instill Education, Cheza Cheza Dance Foundation, University of Nairobi (representing the School Based Teacher Support System (SBTSS) programme which is being implemented by CEMASTEA and the university), Early Childhood Development Department in the County Government of Nairobi, the Ministry of Education, Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and Room to Read.

The learning session was facilitated using the LEGO Serious Play facilitation (LSP) methodology, which uses LEGO bricks as a tool for creative thinking, problem-solving, and communication.

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The EDU team engaged a Lego Serious Play (LSP) certified facilitator to support the learning session's success. All participants were taken through a brief of the LSP methodology to ensure that everyone understood how to use the blocks.

Participants were then asked to use LEGO bricks to describe the structure of the communities of practice in their respective organisations, creating a space to learn from each other's designs and to remain within the boundaries of the CoP models (as opposed to descriptions of whole programs).

After each organisation had described and explained their CoP structure, the participants worked in groups to model CoPs that could address the three challenges that teachers mentioned as hurdles in the implementation of CoPs.

# Challenges of Implementing CoPs

### Lack of Clear Structure and Accountability in Public System:

The Basic Education Curriculum Framework includes CoPs as part of the capacity building framework for a competency-based curriculum.

The framework mentions that teachers will be guided to interact regularly and build relationships that enable them to learn from each other through CoPs but there is no structure provided on how this is to be actualised.

This presents challenges for institutional alignment because there is no standardization from the government on how CoPs should be incorporated into regular teacher professional development.

There is no clear owner of who should be ensuring CoPs actually happen (ie. a school leader, a teacher within the school, or a system leader), and there is no accountability from the MOE or TSC at the national, county or sub-county level on whether CoPs are implemented.

There is also no clarity on successful CoP models that have worked at scale in Kenya within public systems in an institutionalized way.

### Limitations of Technology-Based Interventions:

Although other social platforms have been used in facilitating CoP sessions, WhatsApp was the most commonly mentioned technology-based way of facilitating information exchange within localised CoPs.

One challenge identified with using WhatsApp was not knowing for sure whether members have actually seen or understood the information shared.

Some solved this by asking group members to respond with a reaction for example, thumbs-up emoji. In addition, Whatsapp groups must be moderated consistently to reinforce group norms and culture, and to ensure relevance of information being shared.

Some participants indicated that it was useful to set clear expectations for participation, and to outline consequences for those who break the rules.

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# Findings from the Learning Session

There were many insights shared by participants in the learning session, and participants indicated that they gathered new insights from other CoP designs that would be beneficial to enhance their current designs. Findings from the learning session are summarised in the section below.

## The role of the implementing organisation goes beyond setting up the structure of the CoPs:

The individuals interviewed indicated that the role of the implementing organisation goes beyond including CoPs in the structure of the professional development program. Roles that program officers from the implementing organisation take part in include:

- Attending the CoP sessions

- Identifying and inviting internal and external that can share their experience and best practices during CoP sessions

- Work towards sustainability by mentoring teacher trainers and other system leaders who will eventually support the CoP

- Observe lessons to inform the agenda of subsequent meetings

- Keep system leaders like school leaders, county education officers informed about the program

## Introducing CoPs to the program needs to be intentional and done for all stakeholders:

The organisations that the research team spoke to indicated that implementing organization initiates the formation of the CoP during the training sessions.

The CoPs start at the local level (either school or community- for librarians and dance coaches), and could eventually incorporate more schools/centres to share best practices among each other.

Participants in the program are informed about CoPs from the program initiation, and system leaders for example headteachers are also made aware of the CoPs during program orientation.

## Engaging classroom teachers as master trainers can mitigate capacity challenges:

During the learning session, different organisations indicated that apart from the program officers, they work with teacher trainers in the education system.

The more common teacher trainers in Kenya are Curriculum Support Officers (CSOs) who are mandated to support teachers in curriculum implementation at the school level.

However, organisations indicated a trend towards working with teachers as master trainers instead of CSOs who have a heavy workload and therefore are not able to support CoPs as needed.

Other education system officers for example, county directors of education support the program by identifying teacher trainers and they also keep up with program activities to allow their staff to participate as needed.

Some participants noted that collaborating with the government at the early stages of the project will make for more feasible long-term ownership by the government.
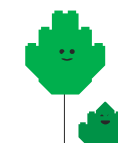
## Evaluators of projects are excluded from CoP composition:

CoPs comprise of teachers, program or project officers, coaches and school leaders.
Curriculum Support Officers (CSOs) and others seen in "evaluation" roles are often excluded from the CoPs so that honest conversations happen as power dynamics can be a challenge in some circumstances.

Teachers take lead with the guidance from the program or project officers or even coaches. School leaders' role is majorly to provide a conducive environment for CoPs to take place, for instance venue and creating time for teachers to take part in the CoPs. Internal or external experts are invited
from time to time to share best practices that benefit the teachers.

*"A good community of practice is one where the participants feel
that they are at the same level." - Program Officer*

## Structure of the CoP Sessions Require Intentional Design:

CoP sessions are done in-person where teachers meet at their school or at a zonal level on a monthly basis. Digital tools like WhatsApp groups are used to share training resources, communicate between program officers and teachers, tackle technical issues (e.g. with the LMS) or share day to day challenges and good practices that can be emulated. Engagement in these groups vary across programs.

Topics covered in CoPs emanate from data collected during observations or challenges shared by the teachers to their coaches or within digital spaces like WhatsApp groups. Program officers or coaches can suggest the agenda and other useful resources that would help facilitate the CoP based on what is being discussed. They could be in the form of videos, written materials or model lessons.

Resources are organized based on the core elements of the program and can be pulled by any CoP or coach at any time to respond to the most urgent need of teachers. The meeting guides are prepared by the implementing organization and cover all topics tackled in the training. CoPs take 1-2 hours depending on the agenda of the day and frequency of meeting.

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# Teacher Motivation to Participate in the CoP is based on Incentives and Skills:

Participants indicated that teachers are motivated to participate in CoPs for both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons.

### Incentives (Extrinsic motivation):

Teachers get motivated to be part of COPs because of certification, financial compensation (e.g. transport reimbursement, data allowance), or career progression. Participants noted that financial incentives do not always lead to consistent participation. However, recognition can be a powerful motivator and encourages teachers to continue participating in the CoPs. Programs may consider providing teachers with meaningful non-financial incentives. For example, programs could collaborate with TSC to have the full Teacher Professional Development (TPD) process (including training and participation in CoPs) approved and TPD points assigned to the program. This would include awarding TPD points for attendance at the CoP (examples of this exist in Ghana and South Africa).

### Mindsets/skills (Intrinsic motivation):

Teachers notice gaps in knowledge and want to be part of CoPs to better understand or enhance their skills and knowledge in a particular area. Participants indicated that the mindset of the teacher, their willingness to learn, their positive attitude and flexibility are critical to get value from the CoP experience. These traits combined with conflict resolution skills like creating a safe space where teachers see each other as equals provides an opportunity for teachers to feel that they have a role to play in the CoPs. Additional value is seen if teachers are given opportunities to be champion teachers and share their areas of strength.

### Measures of Success for CoPs Need to Be Defined:

Although no common set of metrics by which to evaluate the success of a CoP yet exist, the participants in the learning session identified indicators of effective CoPs: attendance rates by teachers, teachers transitioning from meeting at a school level to meeting with teachers from other schools (at a zone or regional level), willingness to share best practices acquired over time, and teachers reflecting that being part of a CoP is a joyful process and a place to recharge.

[2] Learning Management System
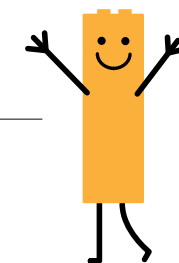
# Common Best Practices in CoPs in Kenya

This section outlines the best practices as shared by groups in the learning session along with mini case studies of outstanding organizations who are utilizing these strategies to facilitate effective CoPs:

## Use data to ensure CoP conversations are addressing the most urgent needs

Data is used to inform the focus of the CoPs and respond to the most urgent needs of the group. This data is collected through structured peer lesson observations, structured external lesson observations for instance by the program officers or other coaches as well as the reflections by teachers is collected between the last meeting and the current meeting to ensure that the conversations are relevant to the current experiences



Cheza Cheza Dance Foundation indicated that the agenda of their monthly meetings are informed by the challenges that the dance coaches report through the month. The data is collected through analysis of issues reported to the program officers, observations done during the dance sessions and conversations on the WhatsApp group, which is used as an official way to share information in the organisation. Cheza Cheza program officers may decide to bring an internal or external expert to share about their experience during the CoP session.
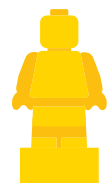
## Provide loose structure with autonomy and flexibility for self-direction

The programs provides a loose CoP structure by suggesting a meeting structure that the CoP can consider to use and providing templates for their discussion topics, even as the participants are made aware that they can adapt these materials to fit into their CoP structure and meeting agendas.

The loose structure might include providing a template with a set of activities e.g overall goals and flow of the meeting agenda that the CoP members can adapt to suit the needs of their session. Availing templates and suggested meeting structure allows the CoP to have a starting point regardless of the identified challenge that the participants want to address in their meeting.

Dignitas supports CoP implementation by providing sample programs and checklists for the meeting that the CoP participants can use to guide their interaction. This forms a foundation that the teachers can rely on to self-define the design of their CoP, and autonomously create an agenda for their meetings.
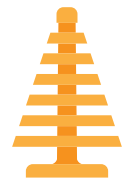
## Use tools to support guided conversations and activities in CoPs

Programs provide CoPs with tools to support their activities. These include tools for peer observations, as well as CoP discussion guides for the different learning areas covered in the training. Initial support is provided by the organization and then ownership is handed over to the CoP.

Internal and external experts identified by program staff are invited during the in-person meetings to support in areas identified as challenging; these are often other teachers or learning leaders with exemplary practice in the topic area.

Room to Read indicated that they provide peer observation tools that teachers can use as a guide when they observe their colleagues. In addition, for every learning area covered during the training session, the organisation provides a discussion guide for it and avails them for use during subsequent CoP sessions.

This allows the participants to have a guide to use for their CoP discussion regardless of the topic that is identified as a challenge. The Organization also invites an expert to the CoP session to address an area that the CoP participants identify as posing a challenge in their work.

## Take a blended approach

Most CoPs take a blended approach with the emphasis on in-person. CoPs are primarily hosted as in-person meetings where teachers meet at school level, zonal or regional level then WhatsApp groups are used to pass information & share resources.

WhatsApp best practices are a continuous learning process to balance enforcing WhatsApp group guidelines and enabling organic conversations. Some are experimenting with additional technology-based interventions including learning management systems that can support ongoing learning.



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The School Based Teacher Support System (SBTSS) under the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQIP) is a school-based teacher support system for Science, Mathematics and English (SME) teachers that is being implemented in both primary and secondary schools in targeted counties.

The School Based Teacher Support System meets teachers for training in-person within their counties, and is now testing the use of a Learning Management System (LMS) that teachers use to access and submit their assignments between one training session and the next. WhatsApp groups are also used to share information and provide support with the LMS system.

# Conclusion

The learning session highlighted the power and potential of CoPs in facilitating the professional development of different education practitioners, while emphasising the importance of addressing challenges and implementing best practices.

By leveraging data, providing a loose CoP structure with autonomy, and using a blended approach, CoPs can effectively support growth and provide a joyful energising environment for learning.

Collaboration with the government stakeholders and providing incentives can further enhance the sustainability and impact of CoPs in the education sector.

# Annex: CoP Models Based on KPLAY Challenges

KPLAY research on the teacher professional development process done so far, including the teacher design session that was done as part of the CoPs learning sprint identified three main challenges that impede the effective implementation of CoPs in the program.

These three challenges include:

**Low digital literacy and low access to technology**

**Low teacher and school leader motivation**

**A high teacher:student ratio, which results in heavy workload**

After sharing the models of their CoPs, the learning session participants were requested to work in groups to create models of CoPs that would address the challenges noted above using the best practices shared by the different organisations.

The LEGO serious Play facilitation method was used in this section. After picking groups based on the challenge they were interested in tackling, the participants first created individual models that would solve the challenge and shared amongst each other in the groups.

They then collaborated to create one model based on the best practices shown in the individual models. In the section below, the report describes the CoP model created for each challenge and includes images of the LEGO Block models.
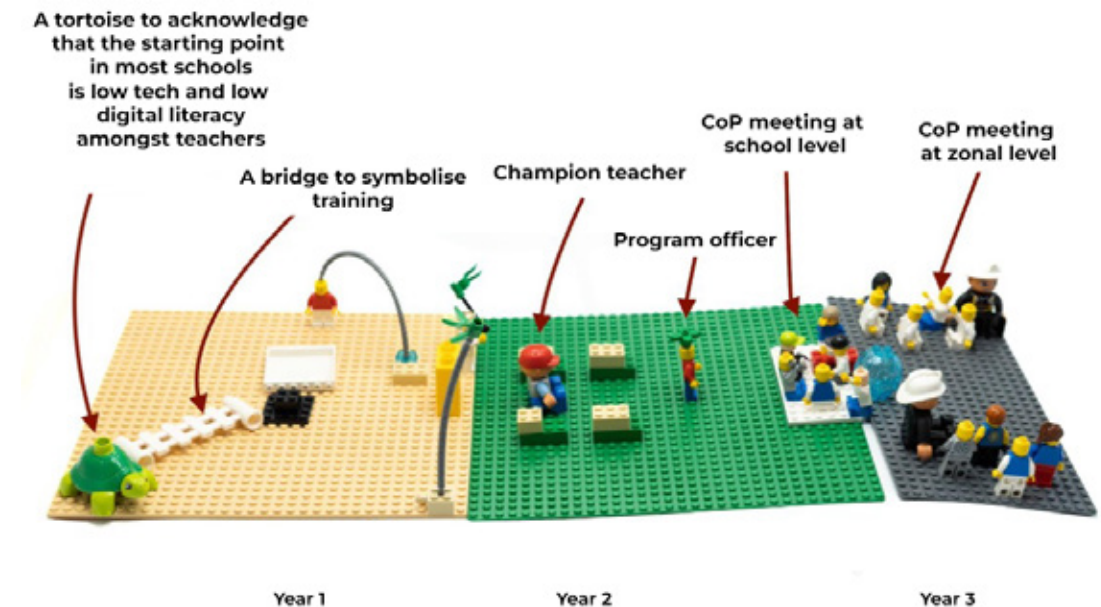
## Challenge 1:

## School with low digital literacy and technological access

In the first year, a school with limited digital literacy and technological access should adopt a stepwise approach by starting with basic, primarily analog methods.

They should begin by conducting training sessions and introducing play activities using low-tech materials. The school should also organize monthly teacher meetings to discuss new teaching methodologies and participate in offline games together. Gradually they can incorporate digital infrastructure and provide digital training for teachers. A start could be utilizing simple technology, like WhatsApp, to enhance communication.

In the second year, the schools should add peer observation to support CoP development and offline digital assets. Basically, they should practise peer learning amongst the teachers organised by the champion, have peer lesson observation by the program officer, let the program officer present during the school level CoPs support and guide, identify emerging leaders who have a passion for LtPwT, and finally create digital assets to be used offline during CoP meetings in helping model teacher best practices from other schools.

In the third year, the teachers should expand the school level CoP to share positive experiences with other schools in their zone, let the champion from the school that is doing well motivate and inspire champions from the other schools and finally in this stage the teachers lean more heavily on technology for sharing of information at the zonal level.



A tortoise to acknowledge that the starting point in most schools is low tech and low digital literacy amongst teachers

A bridge to symbolise training

Champion teacher

Program officer

CoP meeting at school level

CoP meeting at zonal level
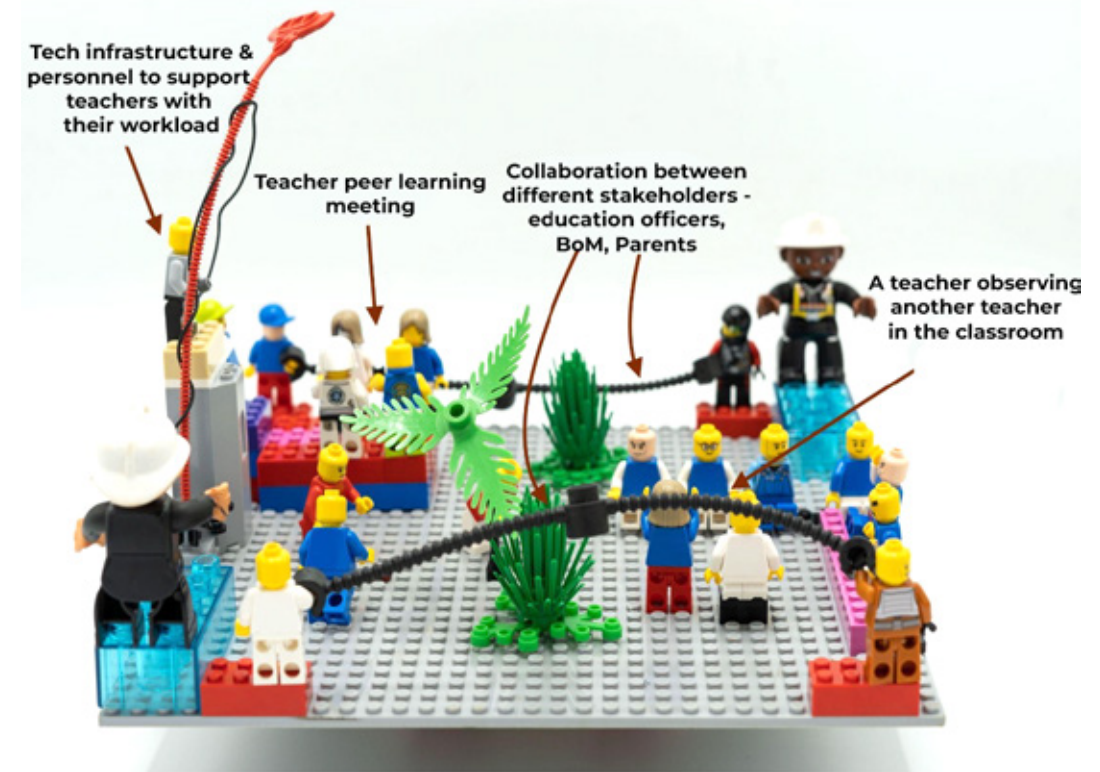
Year 1       Year 2       Year 3

## Challenge 2:

## School with high teacher- student ratio and heavy workload

Teachers with a heavy workload are motivated by their uniting challenges to form a CoP, where the first meeting is initiated by teachers and they request the school leader to attend, then the school engages other stakeholders like the education officers, parents, and non-governmental organization to step in and support.

For example, a member of the BOM watches the children once a month so that teachers can actually make the time to meet during school hours. This pulling together of the community around the teachers makes them feel supported and to see the value of attending the CoP because of the efforts made by the community to support them.

The teachers then meet at the school to discuss good teaching practices in large classrooms. Teachers are always open to having other teachers observe them as they teach in a manner to demonstrate good practices and also receive feedback on improvements that can be made.



Tech infrastructure & personnel to support teachers with their workload

Teacher peer learning meeting

Collaboration between different stakeholders - education officers, BoM, Parents

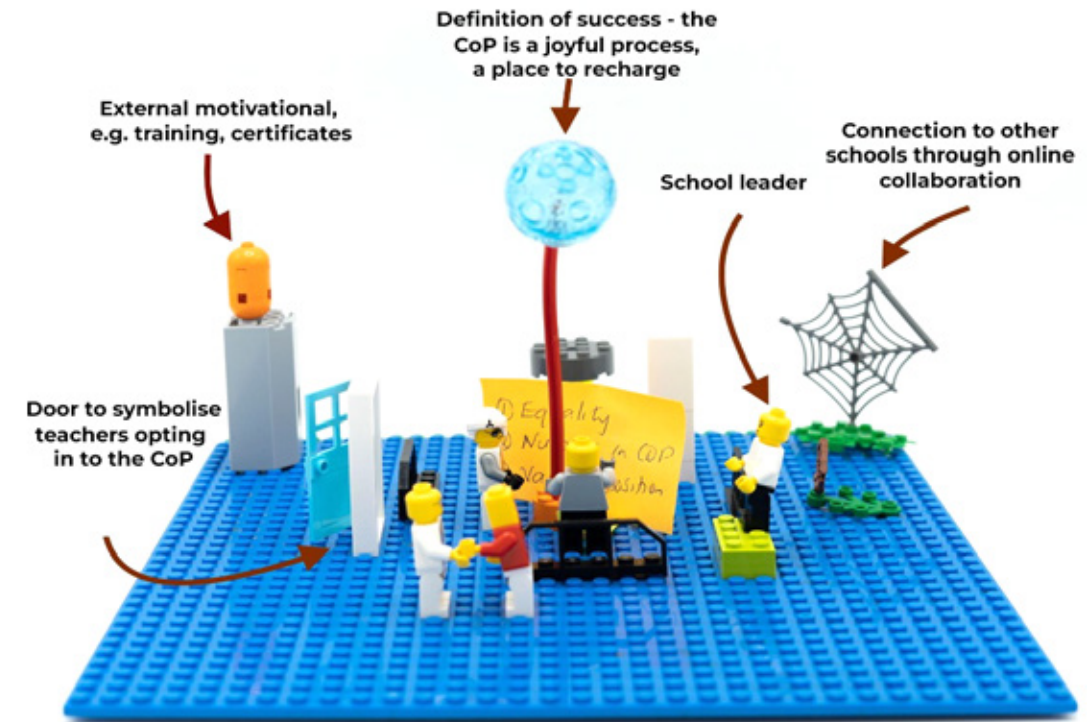A teacher observing another teacher in the classroom

## Challenge 3:

### School with low teacher and school leader motivation

In attempting to localise the challenge, the group noted that low teacher and school leader motivation could be brought about by tensions among the teachers. To have a functional CoP, it is important to resolve any existing issues among the teachers or between the teachers and the school leadership.

The group noted that in addition to providing a space to openly speak about challenges among them, the first CoP meetings would provide an opportunity for teachers to opt to join the CoP. The CoP meetings would be structured such that the numbers to ensure that all participants in the CoP have an active role, and therefore remain motivated.

In this model teachers of different age groups with expertise in different learning areas meet to learn from each other. The approach also uses feedback loops which extends to connecting with other schools for continuous knowledge exchange.

Coupled with teachers being celebrated internally and externally in the communities, CoP meetings are seen as a joyful learning space and a place for teachers to recharge.



External motivational, e.g. training, certificates

Definition of success - the CoP is a joyful process, a place to recharge

School leader

Connection to other schools through online collaboration

Door to symbolise teachers opting in to the CoP

# Participating organizations

# Communities of Practice Report

July 2023