

## Exploring the Use of Communities of Practice as Professional Development for French as a Second Language Teachers

Adam Kaszuba, Callie Mady and Daniel Jarvis

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Article abstract

In Canada, French as a second language (FSL) teachers have indicated a lack of professional learning opportunities adapted to their needs and interests. In order to support their ongoing development, more research is needed to study professional learning models that address their unique set of knowledge and skills, such as language proficiency, intercultural awareness, pedagogy, and collaborative professionalism (Masson et al., 2024). To respond to this need, this study implemented a four-month professional development series for FSL teachers in an Ontario school board based on a community of practice (CoP) framework. Data was collected through pre-/post-questionnaires and participant interviews and analyzed through Wenger et al.'s (2011) cycles of value creation. The results show that while the CoP initiative created immediate and potential value for participants, it did not necessarily lead to an applied value, or reported changes to the FSL teachers' practice.



## **Exploring the Use of Communities of Practice as Professional Development for French as a Second Language Teachers**

Adam Kaszuba  
*University of Ottawa*

Callie Mady  
*Nipissing University*

Daniel Jarvis  
*Nipissing University*

### **Abstract**

In Canada, French as a second language (FSL) teachers have indicated a lack of professional learning opportunities adapted to their needs and interests. In order to support their ongoing development, more research is needed to study professional learning models that address their unique set of knowledge and skills, such as language proficiency, intercultural awareness, pedagogy, and collaborative professionalism (Masson et al., 2024). To respond to this need, this study implemented a four-month professional development series for FSL teachers in an Ontario school board based on a community of practice (CoP) framework. Data was collected through pre-/post-questionnaires and participant interviews and analyzed through Wenger et al.'s (2011) cycles of value creation. The results show that while the CoP initiative created immediate and potential value for participants, it did not necessarily lead to an applied value, or reported changes to the FSL teachers' practice.

### **Résumé**

Au Canada, les enseignants de français langue seconde (FLS) ont signalé un manque d'occasions d'apprentissage professionnel adaptées à leurs besoins et intérêts spécifiques. Pour soutenir leur développement continu, il est nécessaire de mener davantage de recherches sur les modèles d'apprentissage professionnel qui tiennent compte de leur ensemble unique de connaissances et de compétences, incluant la compétence linguistique, la sensibilisation interculturelle, la pédagogie et le professionnalisme collaboratif (Masson et al., 2024). Pour répondre à ce besoin, cette étude a mis en œuvre une série de perfectionnement professionnel de quatre mois pour les enseignants de FLS d'un conseil scolaire de l'Ontario, basée sur un cadre de communauté de pratique (CdP). Les données ont été recueillies au moyen de questionnaires avant/après et d'entrevues avec les participants, puis analysées à l'aide des cycles de création de valeur de Wenger et al. (2011). Les résultats montrent que, bien que l'initiative CdP ait créé une valeur immédiate et potentielle pour les participants, elle n'a pas nécessairement conduit à une valeur appliquée ou à des changements dans la pratique des enseignants de FLS.

## **Exploring the Use of Communities of Practice as Professional Development for French as a Second Language Teachers**

In Canada, there has been a long-term concern that professional development (PD) opportunities are often not available nor adapted to the needs of French second language (FSL) teachers (Day & Shapson, 1996; Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Lapkin et al., 2009; Mollica et al., 2005; Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages [OCOL], 2019). In addition to language skills and pedagogical knowledge, Masson et al. (2024) argued that PD opportunities must provide FSL teachers the occasion to develop their collaborative professionalism. Among the multiple avenues which can foster collaborative professionalism, communities of practice (CoP) have been leveraged across Ontario, the site of this current study, to support the learning needs of teachers generally (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018a; Stagg-Peterson et al., 2011) and language teachers specifically (Ontario Public School Boards' Association [OPSBA], 2021).

Recognizing that the professional learning journeys of teachers, and the supports they need, are unique and change according to their teaching subjects (Campbell, 2018), the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) revised their policy and programs to encourage professional learning structures, such as CoP, to inspire adaptability, responsiveness, and relational accountability in PD design (OME, 2016). In support of this policy, the OME released a new version of the New Teacher Induction Program [NTIP] (OME, 2021) calling for new teachers to develop values and skills related to collaborative professionalism through participation in CoP. Specific to FSL teachers, the OPSBA (2019) organized a series of pilot projects in Ontario school boards which fostered CoP for FSL teachers, and based on the positive results, Jackson (2019) encouraged the use of differentiated induction through CoP that are dedicated towards specific teachers' learning needs. This subject-specific focus is also supported by Frank et al.'s longitudinal research (2021) on the experiences of new teachers in Ontario, where they reported that more FSL teachers found CoP to be useful for their professional learning relative to other teachers (67% versus 32%), although these trends were not statistically significant.

Despite these progressive developments in Ontario, there is limited research on models of CoP that support second language teachers. In their research synthesis, Cammarata et al. (2018) analyzed articles on the theme of professional learning for French immersion teachers in Canada, both in initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing education contexts. They concluded that a significant portion of the research echoed the need for professional learning for FSL teachers but without recommending actionable steps to support its organization. They suggested that there is need for more research which explores different models of professional learning for FSL teachers, both in ITE and continuing education. In response to this gap, the following study reports on FSL teacher participants' perceptions of working together in a CoP adapted to their needs and interests. We begin by reviewing different models of PD which have been developed for language teachers, concentrating primarily on the Canadian context. We then describe the conceptual framework of a CoP in order to situate this study's CoP design. The results report on the immediate and potential value that FSL teachers perceived through participation in the CoP.

## Literature Review

Language teachers have specific needs which need to be taken into consideration when planning PD. For example, as cited in Ontario's NTIP document (OME, 2021), beginning FSL teachers reported that their professional learning needs include a) the availability of effective teaching resources, b) opportunities to improve French language skills, and c) knowledge of effective second language teaching strategies. While the supports FSL teachers need might appear similar to their colleagues (Frank et al., 2021), multiple researchers have argued for the use of knowledge frameworks which are unique to language teachers (Faez, 2011; Salvatori, 2009), based on the premise that language teachers will develop unique professional learning trajectories (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). In this study, we refer to the recent framework by Masson et al. (2024), who identified four 'pillars' of language teacher knowledge, skills, and competencies which should be addressed during teacher education directed toward this group. These pillars include Language Proficiency, Intercultural Awareness, Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills, and Collaborative Professionalism. In the literature presented below, we highlight key studies that address these pillars.

### PD for Language Proficiency

Language proficiency for FSL teachers has been a main focus of professional learning contexts for many decades (Day & Shapson, 1996). While previous research has focused on the language quality of teachers (Veilleux & Bournot-Trite, 2005), more recent studies have problematized the impact of language teacher confidence (Faez & Karas, 2017) and language legitimacy (Wernicke, 2016) on the professional practice and identity of teachers.

Fraga-Cañadas (2011) explained how the aspects of CoP outlined by Wenger (1998) – mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire – apply to language teachers who wish to improve their language proficiency. Briefly, language teachers may join CoP in an effort to develop or maintain their language skills with others through sustained, interpersonal (mutual) engagement. According to Fraga-Cañadas, the challenge of sustaining CoP for language teachers mainly involves overcoming the native speaker ideal. Language teachers might not feel linguistically legitimate enough to participate in such a community. Essentially, when language teachers leverage CoP for language development, they are engaging in a relational way of developing language. Fraga-Cañadas suggested that schools create space for language teachers to engage in CoP through physical, temporal, and financial means.

One of the predominant means for supporting language proficiency development in FSL teacher education has been through the use of a language portfolio (Arnott & Vignola, 2018; Christiansen & Laplante, 2004; Gagné & Thomas, 2011; Lemaire, 2013). In the framework of the portfolio, teachers and teacher candidates build responsibility for their learning by setting specific goals for themselves, selecting concrete tasks to meet those goals, and reflecting on the learning process. As a socio-constructivist practice and tool for collaborative inquiry, there have been mixed results on the use of the language portfolio to promote learning communities as they may be viewed as more individual (Karsenti & Collin, 2010) than collaborative (Arnott & Vignola, 2018).

Language immersion experiences have also been reported in the literature as a way to build the linguistic confidence and communities of language teachers. In their study on university students participating in the Erasmus, a European language exchange program, Bracke and Aguerre (2015) found that such immersion experiences allow for students to participate in various CoP, which in turn are beneficial for learning about pragmatic aspects of the French language. However, they noted that these programs should “provide shared enterprises in the educational domain including collaborative tasks out of class” (p. 158) to encourage more diverse CoP participation.

Lastly, a few pilot projects have been launched in Ontario to support the language development of FSL teachers and teacher candidates (OPBSA, 2021). Arnott et al. (2023) piloted a novel ITE course in which FSL teacher candidates were offered a dedicated cohort section where they discussed the course content in French and optionally submitted assignments in French. The candidates in this cohort section also created video reflections in French and received explicit instruction in the concept of a professional learning community (PLC). The results of the pilot indicated that the French discussion group enabled some candidates to develop their French language proficiency and overcome feelings of linguistic insecurity.

### **PD for Intercultural Awareness**

Research on intercultural awareness has mostly explored the beliefs and practices of FSL teacher candidates. For example, Mady et al. (2017) found that FSL teacher candidates have positive perspectives of including allophone students in their classrooms. Nevertheless, FSL teacher candidates may struggle to enact equitable and anti-racist practices, and in fact, may continue to perpetuate racist and colonial ideologies (Masson et al., 2022).

In his study, Dunn (2011) highlighted how developing anti-racist practices might be limited by the structures of professional learning in an ITE program. The author reported on how FSL teacher candidates developed the concept of social inclusion and critical multiculturalism in both courses and workshops, where the author introduced these concepts to the candidates and then guided the candidates to develop them through a series of activities. The participants reflected on how language is used as a means of discrimination and explored critiques of pedagogy designed to teach culture. Dunn (2011) concluded that the courses and workshops created space for FSL teacher candidates to engage more extensively with the new ways of thinking, but that the short-term nature of both formats meant that they were sufficient to “shape [candidate] practices in relation to their ideals” (p. 63).

In the study by Byrd Clark et al. (2014), the authors brought together teacher candidates from 3 different French language ITE programs. In a virtual exchange, participants engaged in forum discussions, guided by questions from the researchers. In their consideration of how they would integrate students’ multiple identities in their teaching, the teacher candidates engaged in self-reflexivity, as they learned about French diversity in each other’s contexts and questioned assumptions about cultural and linguistic hierarchies.

The aforementioned studies show how FSL educators may have engaged in CoP through interactions with one another over an extended duration of time where the participants questioned their beliefs and developed their practices around a mutual concern.

Nevertheless, none of the studies conceptualize the learning that happened through a CoP lens.

### **PD for Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills**

In their framework, Masson et al. (2024) defined pedagogical knowledge for language teachers as a combination of three domains: general pedagogical knowledge (e.g. classroom management), subject specific knowledge (e.g. knowledge about the language via sociolinguistics), and subject specific pedagogical knowledge (e.g. L2 teaching methodologies). The research shows an array of forms of PD with which educators develop their pedagogical knowledge and skills across these domains.

In one of the earlier versions of a PLC, Muhling (2004) observed four group meetings with 24 teachers. During these meetings, teachers watched videos on teaching strategies, brought resources to share, participated in lessons, and had discussions around pedagogy and assessment. The results indicated that the FSL teachers used the PLC to overcome isolation and that teachers who presented during the meetings felt they benefited from the activities more than non-presenters.

In a series of studies, Kristmanson et al. (2008, 2010, 2011) reported on PLC in which they participated with language teachers in New Brunswick. In the first study (Kristmanson et al., 2008), the authors participated in a PLC with a group of FSL immersion teachers. The purpose of the PLC was for the teachers to discuss, implement, and reflect on their teaching practices to support the writing development of students in a second language. The results showed that the implementation of the PLC strengthened the professional relations and communication among teachers at the school. In the second study (Kristmanson et al., 2010), the authors were participants in a PLC with French immersion and English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. The PLC meetings were used as spaces for the researchers to review best practices and listen to the teachers' concepts of best practices as well as identify their pedagogical concerns. Together, the teachers developed a unit of writing instruction. By following and implementing a common writing framework, the teachers felt they could more easily collaborate with one another. In the third study (Kristmanson et al., 2011), the authors participated in a PLC with a group of 10 second/additional language teachers. During the meetings, the participants discussed aspects of the Common European Framework of Reference and the European language portfolio, as well as how they implemented it in their practice. Through these discussions, teachers developed a common discourse and felt more comfortable communicating ideas around language teaching with both language teachers and non-language teachers. While the teachers had a common vision, they were able to implement and adapt the portfolio based on their own pedagogical preferences.

Lesson planning can be used as an inquiry tool, and the Lesson Study model takes advantage of this idea to support the professional learning of language teachers (Uştuk & Çomoğlu, 2019). Cammarata and Haley (2018) reported on a sixteen-month project with 15 French-immersion teachers. In the first phase, the participants were guided to practice writing lesson plans. In phase two, teachers were invited to plan lessons collaboratively, teach them while others observed, and then held post-observation discussions to reflect on how the lesson unfolded. Participants repeated this cycle 3 more times over the course of a year. The authors noticed that this collaborative process helped teachers upset some of their assumptions and routines in their practice. The Lesson Study model, which engaged

teachers in interactive inquiry phases of planning, action, and reflection, can be a useful way to support collaborative professionalism during PD (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018a).

Building on the idea that more integrated collaboration should be fostered between pre-service and in-service teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Korhonen et al., 2017), some studies aimed to transcend the artificial boundary between preparation and the profession by promoting collaborative inquiry between language educators from both of these contexts. For example, in the study by Davin et al. (2017), two pre-service and two in-service teachers came together in a series of workshops to prepare to implement dynamic assessment in their language classrooms. Over the multi-day workshops, the teachers studied examples of dynamic assessment and then collaboratively reflected on how they would implement it in their own classroom. Over a series of 3 lessons, the teachers implemented their dynamic assessment approach and received feedback from the researchers. The authors suggested that this approach resulted in teachers being more reflective of the types of feedback they provide students during language learning.

In another instance of collaborative learning between pre-service and in-service language teachers, Dubetz (2005) reported on an inquiry-based study group involving six bilingual classroom teachers, two staff developers, two paraprofessionals, a student teacher, and the researcher. The purpose of the study group was to develop practices in English language acquisition and content learning for ELLs. While originally the members were concerned with discussing practices for literacy instruction, the inquiry veered into one which focused on how to teach content and social studies through the second language. The author suggested that the 8-month period allowed for short-term changes in the teachers' theory of practice and provided continuity even during policy shifts.

Overall, these studies show that PD often leverages collaborative, community-based approaches, such as PLC and Lesson Study, to support language teachers' pedagogical knowledge. However, none of these studies use a CoP framework in their design.

### **PD for Collaborative Professionalism**

Teacher education would ideally provide opportunities that encourage the building of skills, dispositions, and values in line with the tenets of collaborative professionalism. According to the OME's vision (2016), educators can engage in collaborative professionalism when PD spaces a) value all voices; b) create trusting environments; c) foster collaboration between the provincial, district, and school levels; d) encourage leadership learning through informal experiences; and e) cultivate exemplary practices through the negotiation of a common vision and the sharing of ideas. As evidenced above, much of the research already aligns with some of the tenets of the OME's vision. Kristmanson et al. (2011), for example, recognized the importance of valuing voices in PLC through democratic participation. Previous PD examples have also promoted collaboration between schools (Muhling, 2004), districts (OPSBA, 2021), and institutions (Byrd Clark et al., 2014). Other studies have focused explicitly on developing values and dispositions related to collaborative professionalism. With regard to trusting environments, Masson (2018) used a learning community approach to foster communication and negotiation through the establishment of positive relationships with peers, which in turn helped to impact FSL teacher actualization. She found the learning community gave agency to FSL teachers by allowing them to recognize common concerns and take ownership of their learning. With regard to informal leadership learning, Kissau and King (2015) piloted

a peer mentoring project which paired 27 early career language teachers with 27 teacher candidates who met three to five times and communicated regularly. The results indicated that the pairing of language teachers created a shared bond which resulted in open and honest communication. Mentors recognized that they did not have to be an expert teacher to provide effective mentorship, and all of them indicated increased confidence in their leadership skills through this experience.

In summary, there are multiple benefits when language teachers come together to learn in a learning community model, such as overcoming isolation (Masson, 2018), developing self-confidence (Kissau & King, 2015; Kristmanson et al., 2011), improving language proficiency (Fraga-Cañadas, 2011), as well as creating possibilities for changes to beliefs and practices (Camarata, 2009; Dubetz, 2005). As the research shows, despite the ongoing concern of a lack of PD opportunities for FSL teachers, an array of professional learning models has been explored to foster the development of the four pillars of language teacher knowledge. Given that none of the studies specifically used CoP as an organizing and analysis framework, the current study sought to offer PD for language teachers following evidence-based criteria for a CoP. We provide our conceptual model below and situate this study's CoP within it.

### **Operationalizing Communities of Practice**

Learning communities have been used for a variety of purposes in educational contexts, resulting in multiple approaches and conceptualizations (McClendon Patrick et al., 2016; Vangrieken et al., 2017). As DuFour (2004) observed, some terms have been used “to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education – a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on” (p. 6). Thus, to clarify how we use the term in this study, this section is intended to provide some historical context and different considerations about the parameters of a CoP. We then outline how we operationalize a CoP.

The term CoP was first coined by Lave & Wenger (1991) to offer a socio-constructivist perspective on how newcomers learned a substantive practice through situated activity in a community setting. Building on this idea, Wenger (1998) suggested that CoP come into existence when their members have three commonalities: a mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. At the same time, PLC, a term coined by Dufour & Eaker (1998), were proposed as a model in which teachers work together in school communities, and has been used for professional learning in certain regions of Canada for multiple decades (Grimmett & D'Amico, 2008). Although some research has made a distinction between these terms (e.g. Kearney, 2015), the synthesis study by Vangrieken et al. (2017) made the compelling argument that in practice, there is virtually no difference between the two.

In particular, Vangrieken et al. (2017) highlighted two means of organizing teacher CoP as evidenced in their review: formal communities and member-oriented communities with pre-set agendas. In formal communities, teachers are often coerced into participating in professional learning to achieve government initiatives, where “pre-set goals [are] directed towards achieving the targets set by the educational standards by the time the [CoP] stops its activity” (p. 52). In contrast, member-oriented communities aim to foster CoP over extended periods of time and in such a way that they can be sustainable even after



the intervention has ended. In these types of CoP, participation is usually voluntary and the community is sustained by quality relationships established between members rather than mandatory attendance and accountability mechanisms (Cassidy et al., 2008). The schedule, session format, and objectives are often pre-set. The most common objectives of CoP are the following (Vangrieken et al., 2017):

1. To share ideas and perspectives about teaching
2. To increase teachers' knowledge of available information resources
3. To discuss practical teaching challenges
4. To exchange teaching strategies, affirm good practices, and improve unsuccessful ones
5. To fill in gaps and deepen teachers' subject matter knowledge
6. To plan lessons for subject matter teaching and implementation of new teaching methods or reforms
7. To perform research and share knowledge about new academic research; and
8. To receive feedback on teaching practice through class observation. (p. 52)

Although the objectives may be pre-set, the goals and purposes of learning originate from teachers, principals, and researchers; more importantly, teacher concerns and practical experiences are the focal point of discussions. This present study offered a member-oriented, voluntary CoP with the view of increasing buy-in from teachers (Talbert, 2009) and centred the learning around a teacher-chosen topic: reading development.

In addition to the voluntary nature of this study's CoP initiative, research recommends meeting additional conditions in order to maximize the potential benefits and sustainability of CoP. For example, the administration must create the conditions which allow language teachers to feel that learning in the CoP is a productive, sustainable, and valuable use of their time (Talbert, 2009). If CoP are treated as an add-on or imposed on teachers' workload, there is less chance that they will feel invested in this type of professional learning (Vangrieken et al., 2017). As such, the administration must provide curricular space (i.e., valuing language learning and the assets of language teachers), physical space (i.e., quiet rooms to meet, permanent classrooms), and emotional space (i.e. factors that reduce stress, such as dedicated professional learning time, release time, reduced workloads) (Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Mason, 2017) in an effort to maximize language teachers' investment in CoP. In this study, administrators committed to the project in advance by prioritizing time for the group of FSL teachers to participate. Prior to the start of the term, principals committed to releasing FSL teachers for this CoP so as to support its delivery during the school day, the board provided space at a central location apart from schools, and teachers were provided with supply teacher coverage so they could attend with minimal impact on their workload. Overall, the purpose of these supports was to set the CoP initiative up for success by signalling to the FSL teachers that the administration had a vested interest in their unique professional learning trajectories.

Once the provision of space and time are met, the last important condition of a CoP is that of collaborative inquiry. As Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018a) noted, the ability to engage in collaborative inquiry is a tenet of an educator's collaborative professionalism. Broadly, collaborative inquiry is the system of actions which educators use to engage in a cyclical process of dialogical sharing, taking action, and reflection to address a shared problem in their practice (DeLuca et al., 2015). Collaborative inquiry can be used to

address the eight common objectives of CoP listed above (Vangrieken et al., 2017) and “naturally follows from previous practitioner-driven model of inquiry, namely critical reflection, action research, and professional learning communities” (DeLuca et al., 2017, p. 68). As seen in the previous studies on professional learning for FSL teachers, any group of language educators who come together in a socio-constructivist capacity to do some sort of inquiry might lead to the emergence of a CoP, regardless of the terminology used to describe the actions associated with that inquiry. In this sense, teachers do not formally participate in or join CoP; rather, “a social space deserves to be called a CoP if it can be characterized by sustained thinking together that is enriched by less intensive forms of participation” (Pyrko et al., 2017, p. 404). In this study, FSL teachers engaged in the collaborative inquiry cycle by discussing concerns, sharing strategies, and collectively planning, in the hopes of fostering the conditions for the emergence of a CoP. With the above considerations in mind, we define CoP as the following:

A community of practice is a professional, physical, and socio-emotional space intentionally cultivated during working hours by the school, the school board, or school-university partnerships through the provision of purposefully-dedicated professional learning blocks of time, wherein a group of educators, including teachers, teacher candidates, support staff, researchers, and administrators, meet voluntarily, either virtually or in-person, for an extended duration and at regular intervals throughout the school year, to establish quality relationships while addressing common concerns they encounter in their practices through some form of collaborative inquiry.

Based on this definition, the purpose of this study was to cultivate the development of such a CoP during a PD initiative, and then examine its perceived value by participating FSL teachers.

### Context

In response to the need for FSL teachers to have subject-specific PD, this study offered a voluntary CoP to FSL teachers in the junior division (Grades 4-6) in one board of education in Ontario. Aligning with the objectives for developing CoP, in creating this opportunity, we partnered with a school board and inquired about a topic of interest for their FSL teachers: developing students' reading skills. Prior to delivery, in demonstration of the value of the potential learning and for the FSL participants themselves, the board's administration committed to providing space and time for teachers to participate in the four full-day sessions over a term with coverage for supply teachers paid for by the study through funding from the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities. The same funding also supported a guest speaker to join the group for four hours, two the first day and two the last day. In recognition of the four pillars of second language teacher education, the sessions were delivered in French as means to support teachers' linguistic proficiency. Although these sessions were not designed specifically to develop intercultural awareness, they did address FSL-specific pedagogical knowledge given the FSL teachers' choice of topic. Lastly, they followed a collaborative inquiry approach to support the development of collaborative professionalism.

With the teacher-chosen topic as the content focus and with the goal to influence practice following the objectives of CoP, we formatted four full-day sessions to allow for an exchange on the topic including a sharing of resources and strategies the first half of each session followed by an opportunity for teachers to plan collaboratively in the second half. Adhering to the collaborative inquiry cycle, the follow-up sessions allowed time for teachers to share their experiences with delivering the lesson, to receive feedback, and to plan for future lessons with this feedback in mind. Later sessions then repeated the cycle of sharing, action, and reflection. More specifically, as chosen by the teachers prior to the first session and in consultation following each session for the remaining days, the topics addressed in each session were as follows, in chronological order: a) teaching and evaluating reading, exploring various strategies to promote comprehension, b) planning for reading comprehension instruction, c) exploring structured literacy, and d) examining strategies for differentiating for reading comprehension.

### Methods

This article is part of a larger study that examined teachers' confidence in supporting students' reading development. For the focus of this current paper, we draw from data collected using a mixed methods approach to explore teachers' perceptions of the CoP initiative. In particular, this article examines the questions: a) how do FSL teachers perceive the CoP delivery and b) how does this delivery model compare to those of past PD opportunities. Data collection tools included a pre/post questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The pre-questionnaire was completed prior to the first session. It included 29 items with a Likert-scale (with 1 indicating strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree) and focused on the teachers' experiences with past PD offerings. Then, we used the same items on the post-questionnaire, with slight wording adaptations, to examine the teachers' experience following their participation in the CoP initiative. The post-questionnaire was completed at the end of the fourth session.

To examine the value of the CoP initiative compared to past PD offerings, we grounded the design of the data collection and analysis in Wenger et al. (2011) value creation framework for assessing such communities. We chose this framework because it allows for analysis of multiple types of data, which is appropriate to our mixed-methods approach. According to the authors, researchers can use the framework to identify how value is created through CoP by examining the impact of the initiative at the four different cycles of knowledge creation (Wenger et al., 2011, section 4.1). In Cycle 1 (immediate value), the focus is on activities and interactions. Sharing tips and stories, engaging in useful conversations, or asking a question may result in participants recognizing an immediate value of the CoP. In Cycle 2 (potential value), the focus is on knowledge capital. Participants may recognize that certain types of capital, such as personal assets, social relationships, resources, reputation, or new learning formats could have the potential to be realized later. In Cycle 3 (applied value), the focus is on changes in practice. Participants might recognize value from the CoP if they are able to identify the ways that the application of knowledge capital has impacted their practice. Lastly, in Cycle 4 (realized value), the focus is on performance improvement. Instead of assuming that changes in practice have resulted in meaningful and sustainable changes to performance, participants may perceive a realized value when they reflect on whether the application of knowledge capital has led to the desired outcomes, as defined by all stakeholders.

As such, the questionnaire was designed to explore the four different levels of value of the PD sessions with a Likert-scale (with 1 indicating strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree). Once the responses were collected, the Likert scale allowed for pre- and post-PD comparisons using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test (Wilcoxon, 1945), which was chosen as it allows for an analysis between a larger-size pre-questionnaire group in relation to a smaller post-questionnaire group. On the pre-questionnaire, teachers also responded to questions pertaining to their first languages, how they learned French, as well as professional information pertaining to their teaching qualifications and experiences. Post-questionnaire participants were also invited to partake in a semi-structured interview. These interviews acted as “personal narratives” in the data collection and analysis process (Wenger et al., 2011, section 3.1). In keeping with the focus of this current study, they provided additional insight on key events, interactions, or activities that shaped the collective identity of the emerging CoP during the PD sessions, as experienced and expressed by its individual members. Taken together, the results from the questionnaires and the interviews, presented in the results, allowed us to assess and promote the value creation of this CoP initiative.

## Participants

Thirty-five FSL teachers completed the pre-questionnaire. Although forty FSL teachers took part in the first PD session, only those who provided permission to use their data for this study are described. The majority of pre-questionnaire respondents had English as their first language (71%) and had 10 or more years’ experience teaching FSL (54%).

Following the first PD session, teachers were invited to continue with three additional full-day sessions. Of the 13 who were interested, nine were chosen to participate due to limited funds for supply teachers to provide relief. Teachers were chosen from the 13 if they taught in the junior division. The availability of supply teachers influenced the number of participants in each of the following sessions which varied from seven to nine. Seven teachers who had also completed the pre-questionnaire completed the post-questionnaire and participated in a semi-structured interview. Similar to the larger group, 71% had English as their first language and 29% had French. Like the larger group, the majority of the smaller group (89%) had over ten years’ teaching experience with the remaining 11% having two years’ experience in FSL. The majority of post-questionnaire participants (78%) were also teaching in elementary French immersion while the remaining 22% taught in the core French program. All the smaller group of participants (100%) also indicated having the majority of their teaching experience at the elementary division, but with the majority of that experience (80%) in core French. Slightly different than the pre-questionnaire group, the majority post-questionnaire respondents had been enrolled in French immersion (60%) with the others enrolled extended French (20%) or French first language contexts (20%) in elementary school. In secondary school, 20% continued in immersion, 40% in extended, 20% in French first language, and the remaining 20% did not continue French at the secondary level. Similar to the pre-questionnaire responses, a minority (40%) of the post-questionnaire participants studied French as the university level.

## Results

In this section, we begin by examining the results of the pre/post questionnaire data. We then explore how this value was experienced by candidates in detail through their personal narratives.

### Questionnaire

In the pre-questionnaire, 29 items pertained to the participants' perceptions of their prior PD experiences. Although the post-questionnaire contained the same items, it focused on participants' experiences following the PD sessions delivered in the context of the current study. We present and compare the results from the pre- and post-questionnaires below.

On the pre-questionnaire, as seen in Table 1, a minority of teacher participants agreed on the usefulness of past PD sessions with a mean of more than three, where one indicates strongly agree, on 15 of 29 of the items pertaining to past board-delivered PD sessions. The remaining pre-questionnaire items had mean values that ranged from 2.16 to 2.97, showing agreement with 14 items. Post-questionnaire respondents expressed greater agreement on 28 of the 29 items indicating the value they placed on the CoP initiative. Only one item garnered less agreement post-CoP (i.e., I connect with my colleagues from different schools in between these PD sessions). Given the small number of participants and the different sample sizes pre- and post-questionnaire, a non-parametric technique, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, was required for comparison purposes. Further, the *W*-statistic was chosen due to the small sample size as it approximates a normal distribution. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank test revealed statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-questionnaire results,  $W = 21$  ( $p < .05$ ), indicating greater agreement post-PD sessions with 1 being strongly agree ( $Md = 1.46$ ,  $n = 7$ ) compared to before ( $Md = 2.89$ ,  $n = 35$ ). Given the small and unequal sample sizes, these results should be considered in combination with the interview results below and with other research studies.

**Table 1**  
Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development Activities

		Pre-PD sessions			Post-PD sessions		
Item#	Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Count	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Count
Immediate Value							
1	I have fun at board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.	3.06	1.22	14	1.43	0.49	7
2	I establish relationships through board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.	2.40	1.15	24	1.43	0.49	7

3	I actively participate in board-organized PD opportunities/post=these PD sessions.	2.17	1.16	28	1.43	0.49	7
4	I am able to network in board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.	2.63	1.33	23	1.57	0.49	7
5	At board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions, I benefit from team building activities.	3.09	1.34	17	2.00	1.31	6
6	Board-organized PD sessions /post=these PD sessions respond to my needs.	3.49	1.36	11	1.29	0.45	7
7	I gain inspiration at board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.	3.14	1.38	16	1.14	0.35	7
8	Board-organized PD sessions /post=these PD sessions are valuable to my growth.	3.03	1.40	18	1.00	0.00	7
9	I feel a part of a community of teacher learners at board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.	2.23	1.12	28	1.14	0.35	7
10	Reasons for board-organized PD sessions /post=these PD sessions are shared with me as a participant.	3.15	1.33	15	1.14	0.35	7
11	Board-organized PD opportunities/post=these PD sessions are relevant to my practice.	2.91	1.26	17	1.43	0.49	7
12	Board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions have value.	3.06	1.48	18	1.00	0.00	7
Potential Value							
13	I acquire new skills/knowledge from board-organized PD	2.85	1.33	20	1.00	0.00	7

	sessions/post=these PD sessions.						
14	I gain confidence in my practice from board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions. 2.1	3.14	1.33	15	2.00	1.31	6
15	I connect with my colleagues from different schools between PD sessions/post=these PD sessions. 2.2	2.23	1.04	26	2.29	1.39	4
16	I can go to my colleagues I have met in PD sessions /post=these PD sessions when I need pedagogical guidance.2.2	2.43	1.20	24	1.86	1.36	6
17	Board-organized PD sessions /post=these PD sessions offer information that I can then apply to my class.2.3	2.94	1.33	18	1.14	0.35	7
18	I have developed a stronger voice due to my participation in board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.2.4	3.41	1.37	11	1.86	0.64	6
19	Board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions provide me with new resources.2.3	2.71	1.23	20	1.29	0.45	7
20	I understand learning differently because of my participation in board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.2.3	3.03	1.40	17	1.71	0.70	6
21	Board-organized PD opportunities /post=these PD sessions have allowed me to create resources.2.3	3.21	1.32	12	1.71	0.88	5
22	I develop best practices based on offered board-	3.48	1.40	12	1.57	0.73	6

	organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.2.3						
23	I improve my level of expertise as a result of such opportunities/post=these PD sessions.2.3	3.15	1.40	15	1.43	0.49	7
24	I receive ideas from others at board-organized PD sessions /post=these PD sessions that I then implement.	2.52	1.28	23	1.43	0.49	7
25	At board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions, we share of our experiences.	2.36	1.15	25	1.43	0.49	7
26	A dedicated facilitator leads our board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.2.2	2.16	1.18	27	1.14	0.35	7
Applied Value							
27	I am a better teacher, in part, because of board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.3	3.18	1.50	16	1.43	0.49	7
28	My students learn better as a result of my participation in board-organized PD opportunities/post=these PD sessions.3	3.56	1.40	12	1.57	0.49	7
Realized Value							
29	I am a more reflective teacher, in part, because of board-organized PD sessions/post=these PD sessions.4	2.97	1.38	19	1.57	0.49	7

As seen in the results from the questionnaire, the post-PD sessions were experienced by teachers as impactful in relation to all levels of value: immediate, potential, applied, and realized. To explore in more detail different facets of this value creation, we elaborate on the interview data below.



## Assessing Value Creation through the CoP

Corresponding to Wenger et al.'s framework (2011), the personal narratives in this study allow us to provide a more detailed account of the value creation of the CoP identified in the questionnaire. In particular, the interview data revealed that participants placed an emphasis on the a) immediate value of the activities and interactions that occurred during the PD sessions; and b) the potential value of the collective knowledge and perspectives that were distributed across this FSL teacher community. We explore these types of value below.

### *Immediate Value*

When asked how the CoP responded to their needs, if at all, the FSL teachers underscored the immediate value that accompanied learning and collaborating through active participation in the community:

You're there to help each other learn. It's more of a learning community. (Teacher 4)

Informal conversations...were so useful. To be able to chat with other teachers who do the same thing that you do every day, and to give us the opportunity to do that...It wasn't too structured that [we kept] moving on to this, that, and the other thing. It was [more] like, let's just talk about what we just read about, or what we just were presented with. So conversations go a really long way, and can be very inspiring. (Teacher 5)

These comments support the idea that the CoP initiative created an immediate value for the FSL teachers as they interacted and supported each other through conversations about shared experiences and concerns. Being able to learn with colleagues who understand their challenges created an immediate connection and solidarity between these FSL teachers. Rather than resorting to a "bureaucratic" (Talbert, 2009, p. 561) learning format based on knowledge transfer, the socio-constructivist nature of the PD allowed for conversations to center around participant ideas and reflections. In other words, participants could recognize an immediate value in the CoP because this form of professional learning was more effective and relevant to them.

### *Potential Value*

As seen in the questionnaire and as supported by interview comments below, this study's CoP was deemed valuable because participation created different forms of knowledge capital among the FSL teachers. One of the most notable forms of potential value was the teachers' perceptions of their transformed ability to learn in such a CoP initiative, or their learning capital:

So much in the last five years has been around math. I don't teach math, but I've been made to sit through so much math PD that is completely irrelevant to me. So it was so refreshing to see a session that was centered around French--I say immersion, that's my context, but French second language in particular. (Teacher 5)

And people really wanting to improve themselves, but like help each other improve as well. That felt different. (Teacher 6)

This is the first time that we have had PD specific to French or core French in the last few years like I don't remember the last time we've had anything. I think the last time we had something was when I started and that's been years. They just lump us in with everybody else for stuff that doesn't even apply, it's not applicable to me as a teacher and I just have to sit through it. This is actually useful to me. (Teacher 7)

In these quotes, the participating FSL teachers indicated having become accustomed to professional learning through training methods and content that were not relevant to their needs or interests. These previous experiences limited the potential value that they initially thought was possible from professional learning. In contrast, the facilitated learning in this voluntary CoP allowed for the development of learning capital: in the case of Teacher 6, their comment of “that felt different” demonstrates that they acknowledged the potential new ways for FSL teachers to learn through such a PD experience (Wenger et al., 2011). Moreover, the comments about the usefulness and relevance of this type of learning reflects the human and social capital that the FSL teachers developed within the CoP. By recognizing commonalities between their teaching experiences, they could experience FSL teaching “knowledge as a collective good distributed across a community or network” (Wenger et al., 2011, section 4.1), rather than contained within the FSL teacher. One participant recognized the value of this shared perspective:

It was relevant to French immersion teachers. Often, when we do have board-wide PD, it is more for the English schools. I know we're all teaching and we have very similar curriculums, but this was specific for French immersion, which was very relevant and useful for us. (Teacher 3)

Another important form of potential value experienced by participants was through tangible capital. Consistent with the pillar of pedagogical knowledge and skills for second language teacher education (Masson et al., 2024), some interviewees specified the appreciation of the resources that were circulated. As the participants shared pedagogical strategies, tools, and activities with one another, they not only developed potential sources for information, but also established a socio-informational structure among themselves to facilitate access to such information. In fact, the flexible structure of this CoP initiative allowed for participants to share resources beyond the initial goal of reading:

That's why this PD was so great. They've given us so many resources; this is what I've been wanting since I started! [Initially] I created my own because it wasn't there, and now they have ones that are better...it's just allowing us to [access] more resources so that we can expand [on our practice] even more. (Teacher 1)

She [the guest speaker] gave me so many ideas for how to better utilize my time with those [student] groups. That group that's really behind, I need to be reading with them every day, but I can't. So she really addressed one of my needs with my reading groups, which is really nice, because now I have a better idea of how I want

to approach them in January, and do it a little differently than what I've been doing. (Teacher 5)

You want to do [differentiation], but it feels so demanding. If I have 57 students, wow, how am I going to do that? But then when she [the guest speaker] says, here are some ways you can differentiate with your whole class at the same time. I'm like, okay! (Teacher 6)

As seen in these quotes, the participants showed increased confidence to address specific concerns in the FSL context, such as differentiation, by gaining access to tangible capital in this CoP initiative. As in the case with Teachers 1 and 5, they felt empowered to take advantage of the potential value of these resources by possibly changing their practice following the PD sessions. Although participants gained social capital by establishing new relationships between themselves, these quotes also emphasize the personal value that they experienced while participating in this CoP initiative. One teacher commented on the perceived personal value:

And then just some of the practical resources, like the book, and being able to dig into that, and get other people's perspectives on it. And then some of the activities [the guest speaker] offered us today...that's fresh in my mind today, but it was also very inspiring for me. And it made me excited at a time [of the year] when it's hard to get excited teaching. (Teacher 5)

As seen in this quote, this form of PD “reawakened their sense of calling and professional identity” (Wenger et al., 2011, section 4.1). By interacting with an FSL expert in the context of this CoP, participants were able to connect their learning and actions to the broader field of the FSL profession, which increased their sense of personal value through inspiration, confidence, and status.

Lastly, with the careful consideration of the CoP design according to member-oriented objectives (Vangrieken et al., 2017), and respecting the social, physical, and emotional conditions necessary for effective professional learning with language teachers (Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Mason, 2017), this PD initiative provided potential value through collective intangible assets (Wenger et al., 2011). In particular, the administrators in this study provided time and space to support the FSL teachers' learning, and this administrative support contributed to the perceived reputational capital of the CoP participants. In the interviews, teachers highlighted the validation that these intangible assets offered them:

It gave me a voice; I feel empowered to do the good teaching that I know how to do. (Teacher 6)

I felt supported. I felt valued. I felt validated. I think the validation piece is probably the biggest for me because I feel validated that someone is listening. We are struggling with kids who cannot read, and it empowered me to be more rejuvenated. (Teacher 9)

Overall, the interview data provided salient information about the potential value that the FSL teachers reported in the questionnaires with regard to their experiences while participating in this CoP initiative. As they participated in the PD sessions over an extended period of time and with colleagues who shared their concerns and interests, they developed multiple forms of capital, including human, social, tangible, reputational, and learning.

While participants recognized the potential value from CoP-style learning and mentioned how the forms of capital may influence their practice, none of the interview data reported on specific changes to practice or performance. Although the questionnaire data had signalled a possible applied and realized value of these CoP, it was difficult to find interview data that corroborated this assertion. We discuss possible explanations for this absence of data below.

### Discussion

Since many FSL teachers report a lack of PD opportunities designed with their needs in mind (OCOL, 2019), there is a need for more detailed PD models which respect the unique professional learning trajectories of this group of teachers (Cammarata et al., 2018). This study responds to this need by proposing and enacting a professional learning initiative based on a CoP framework. This study's participants reflected the above situation in the pre-questionnaire where results highlighted that the majority of participants did not perceive their past PD experiences to have great value as shown in the majority of item responses. In comparing the participants' previous PD experiences to what they experienced in this study, the questionnaire and interview data confirmed the immediate and potential value FSL teachers placed on CoP-style learning. However, given the smaller sample size of the post-PD data, the post-PD quantitative data should be examined in combination with the study's interview results that took place post-PD as well as with consideration of other research studies.

Among other potential factors that may have contributed to the success of the CoP, we posit that the preparation for and delivery of the CoP as grounded in research bolstered its positive outcomes. By adhering to the objectives of member-oriented CoP (Vangrieken et al., 2017), and by centering teachers' declared interests in choosing a topic (e.g., Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Lapkin et al., 2009; OCOL, 2019), the design of this CoP initiative combined some advanced planning with sufficient flexibility to respect the ongoing needs of the participants throughout its delivery. As seen in the results, FSL teachers were inclined to voluntarily participate in FSL-specific PD and to capitalize on this flexibility by selecting a topic of relevance (Talbert, 2009). As a result, they were able to extract an immediate value from the PD sessions as they interacted with colleagues who shared their experiences and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge and skills (Masson et al., 2024). Moreover, because this CoP initiative had an extended duration and involved an expert, participants were able to develop relationships with other members across their school board and in their field, which allowed them to perceive different forms of knowledge capital and the potential value that it afforded them. Overall, by fostering the conditions necessary for curricular, physical, and emotional space (Mason 2017), this CoP initiative was intentionally set up to succeed by enhancing the value creation that participating FSL teachers could experience.

Grounding the exploration of the CoP in Wenger and colleague's (2011) framework to assess such communities allowed means by which to explore teachers' perceptions of the

CoP model as applied in this context. As shown in the results, the FSL teachers confirmed the immediate and potential value that they were able to perceive through the PD sessions. Yet, none of the participants' comments reflected an applied or realized value, even though the iterative design of the CoP would have allowed for such value creation. We suggest two ways to interpret this result. First, we could infer that there was an applied and realized value, but that these forms of value were not verbalized by the participants during the interviews. Either the interview questions were not formulated well to solicit this type of information, or the participants were not aware of how the CoP changed their practice and performance. Second, we might infer that the methodological design of this CoP initiative was insufficient to go beyond the Cycle 2 threshold of potential value. Four PD sessions over one semester may not be enough time for FSL teachers to develop the knowledge and skills related to collaborative inquiry and at the same time implement an inquiry cycle in a meaningful way such that it changes their practice. Indeed, compared to other CoP-style initiatives for language teachers (Cammarata & Haley, 2018; Dubetz, 2005; Kristmanson et al., 2008, 2010, 2011; Masson, 2018), the timeframe in this study was relatively short. As another methodological limitation, the expert was only present during the first and last PD sessions, leaving the participants to fend for themselves in between. The lack of an applied value may have resulted from a case of "solidarity without solidity", where "the collaborative inquiry groups included nobody with real expertise in the subject area" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018b, p. 21). Although the expert provided initial support at the level of knowledge and skills related to pedagogy, they were not able to provide ongoing support at the level of knowledge and skills related to collaborative professionalism and inquiry. Even with the right conditions, it cannot be assumed that language teachers are prepared to enact self-led CoP, especially if their previous PD experiences militated against this style of learning. "Authoritative knowledge has an indispensable role to play in teacher collaboration" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018b, p. 21), and an expert's ongoing support may be necessary for teachers to perceive applied and realized value from CoP initiatives.

Consistent with the study by Cammarata and Haley (2018), administrator support played a key role in creating the conditions to set up this PD initiative for language teachers. Nevertheless, while the administrators' role helped FSL teachers overcome the marginalization that they have often experienced with PD in the past (Knouzi & Mady, 2014), it may be challenging to go beyond the potential value of these CoP without more comprehensive support. The fact that the CoP only lasted for one semester or that the expert was only partially involved was the result of resource allocation decisions made by the administration of the participating school board. As Talbert (2009) suggested, "the allocation of resources of all kinds – base budgets, titled funds, personnel, equipment, and space – determines a system's capacity to develop [CoP]s" (p. 569). Future opportunities to offer a CoP to FSL teachers may benefit from seeking funding that would allow for sustainability of the CoP beyond that of a term, and with more involved support during the inquiry process.

Despite these limitations, participating FSL teachers detailed that they valued the format and delivery of the CoP and recognized its potential influence on their practice. Using a CoP framework in the design of PD may be a beneficial way to support the unique professional learning trajectories of language teachers. Future studies may explore how additional subject-specific PD offerings and extended research thereof may also be made more sustainable through such a CoP design.

Correspondence should be addressed to Adam Kaszuba.

Email: [akaszuba@uottawa.ca](mailto:akaszuba@uottawa.ca)

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