DOI: 10.2478/dcse-2025-0006

Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 57-76, 2025

Principals' Intergenerational Knowledge-Sharing Practices in a Professional Learning Community: A Case of a South African Education Circuit

Bongani Nkambule
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9022-0960

Bongi Mashiane-Nkabinde
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7426-3327
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

The kernel of this paper was to investigate the state of intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices in a principals' professional learning community (PLC) at a selected South African education circuit. The paper was nested in a qualitative approach and the interpretivist paradigm. Deliberate and snowball sampling techniques were employed to draw out eight participants of different generational orientations, namely the Boomers II (1955 – 1964), Generation X (1965 – 1980) and Millennials (1981 – 1996) whose subjective voices moulded the findings of the paper. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice (CoP) theory was used as a theoretical backbone for the paper. The final outlook of the thematic analysis demonstrated that intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices entrenched an asset-based mindset in a PLC and resulted in knowledge transfer, bridging of skills gaps, and elimination of misconceptions among members. It enabled members to meaningfully and jointly brainstorm strategies to address challenges that affect their leadership role. In addition, the finding revealed that the bondage among members invoked a sense of codependence in them, in terms of which those from adequately resourced schools shared their resources with those from under-resourced schools. Another finding exposed minor (but costly) barriers to the optimal functionality of intergenerational relations caused by code-switching between English and vernacular (Indigenous) languages, which diminished non-vernacular language speakers' absorption of information. The second barrier, as expressed by the youngest members of the PLC (i.e., Millennials), was caused by overreliance on the older members' (i.e., the Boomers II and Generation X) expert power to resolve decision-making stalemates, resulting in non-distributive decision-making. The paper recommended that code-switching be minimised to enable all members to participate in knowledge sharing on an equal basis. Older members of the PLC are encouraged to view the inclusion of younger members in key decision-making processes as a vital strategy to uphold the integrity and sustainability of intergenerational dialogue, collective social responsibility, and effective problem-solving.

Keywords: Professional learning community; intergenerational knowledge sharing; knowledge management; principals.

Introduction

The paper responded to calls by several scholars (Aamir et al., 2021; Jilani et al., 2020; Meflinda et al, 2018; Martins et al, 2019; Muñoz-Pascual et al., 2019; Ngubane, 2024; Romm, 2022, 2024; Oxenswärdh, 2019, Heasly et al, 2024)) encouraging researchers to publish research demonstrating methods of harnessing today's Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) to deliver sustainable employee performance. Discussing the impact of 4IR, also known as the "knowledge economy," is warranted because it has implications for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Compared to the first three industrial revolutions (Kayembe & Nel, 2019), the speed and scale of 4IR disruptions "in the past few years alone have been immense" (Gawel & Herweijer, 2020, p. 5) and necessitate that individuals adapt their knowledge to effectively navigate the current revolution. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe organisational knowledge as a phenomenon that comes in two shapes: *tacit* and *explicit*. Tacit knowledge is abstract in appearance since it rests in the mind of a person and is made of a person's hard and soft skills that are generated through experience and remain their exclusive intellectual property until it has been written down, recorded via technology or verbalized (through dialogical engagements). While explicit knowledge is concrete in appearance and can be physically accessed, it signifies everything written down or documented for everyone to see or peruse. The most efficient way of managing the codification of tacit and explicit knowledge is practising knowledge management (KM). Farooq (2018) argues that any service-oriented organisation that seeks to rubber stamp its survival in today's knowledge-based economy, must enmesh KM with their operational goals. In the same breath, Schwab (2016, para. 19) contends that "the ability of government systems and public authorities to adapt [to 4IR methods and systems] will determine their survival." Nenungwi and Garaba (2022) argue that in adopting KM, public sector organizations demonstrate their commitment to becoming more service-oriented and socially responsive in their approach to delivering public services.

Bratianu and Bolisani (2015) have observed that in the current revolution, the "future is not a simple extrapolation of the present, but a thinking world where new knowledge should be created and processed to achieve some strategic business objectives."(p. 170). Its influence is taking hold in all professions, private economic sectors, and public service organizations, such as schooling systems (Kayembe & Nel, 2019) whose uptake of KM has been on a sharp rise (Nkambule, 2023; Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023, 2024; Nkambule et al., 2024; Romm & Nkambule, 2024). Different schooling systems use KM to improve the effectiveness of different key areas of operations (Kazak, 2021). Gxwati (2011) observed that South African provincial arms of the schooling system apply KM to optimise educational administration processes. In their respective studies, Ali, Friska, & Efendi (2023), Ferdinandus etal., (2015) and Usman et al (2024) established that education districts in Indonesia mandate schools to practice KM to embed a knowledge-sharing habit among teachers, cultivate a culture of collaboration and sustain positive working relationships and technology-mediated dialogue. Nguyen et al (2023) found that teachers in Vietnamese high schools implement KM to promote digitally mediated curriculum delivery practices to stimulate learner creativity. Nkambule et al., (2024) ascertained that South African schools adopt KM to optimise their creation and application of socially responsive problem-solving

knowledge. Nkambule and Ngubane (2024) found that several South African schools use KM to increase teachers' knowledge retention in professional development programs. There is thus an indication that schooling systems across Africa embed KM practices in professional development processes to capacitate principals with 4IR leadership skills (Awodiji & Naicker, 2024). These findings show that public schooling systems use KM to mitigate 4IR disruptions and negotiate their settlement as 21st-century education institutions.

Okeke and Okeke (2016) define KM as "a set of processes that deals with a collective understanding of optimizing knowledge activities … which are relevant in their knowledge economy, as such, enhances their construction and use of knowledge".(p.19). In layman terms, KM aims to ensure that individual workers collaboratively share their "internal knowledge" for it to be documented physically. Despite KM containing four processes (knowledge storage, knowledge innovation, knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing), knowledge sharing is rated above all. There is a common understanding that "the knowledge stored in organisational repositories (explicit knowledge) and those that reside in the knower (tacit knowledge) is not useful unless and until it is shared and utilised by those who need them" (Samuel & Odor, 2018, p. 39). Hence, "participation in formal and informal [professional] communities" (Yeh et al., 2011, p. 150) has become a powerful knowledge-sharing resource and salient practice of 21st-century education (West & Williams, 2018). By capacitating teaching professionals "with content knowledge and skills and viewing them as change agents, education policies will foster quality and social cohesion when they recognise diversity, engage representation, reconcile injustice, and redistribute wealth and resources" (Kubow, 2024. p. 827).

In South Africa, the idea of having professional learning communities (PLCs) as some of the professional development interventions in primary and secondary education is propounded by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which enacted the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development (ISPFTED, 2011 – 2025). The framework stipulates that the formation of PLCs can embed a culture of collaborative learning, self-generated problem-solving, and agenda-setting across all ecologies of teaching, learning, and school management (DBE, 2018). More aptly, the DBE (2018, p. 2) defines a PLC as "a group of professionals who decide, voluntarily, to come together to learn with and from each other on needs they have identified themselves, through taking control of their personal development". According to Schechter and Feldman (2013), PLCs serve as a meeting place for colleagues to engage in dialogue and collaborate on developing strategies to enhance their professional practice. Such "networks of learning processes that exist among PLC members, where teaching professionals continuously deliberate with one another on how to solve problems" (Schechter & Feldman, 2013, p. 785) can richly benefit the development of the education sector. The ubiquity of PLCs in the primary and secondary education sector is said to have begun in the early to mid-1990s (Dufour et al., 2008). They also vary in shape and size and can either occur interpersonally among groups of workers of the same profession and occupational level or interpersonally between groups of workers of different occupations or occupational ranks such as learners and teachers or teachers and deputy principals and vary in size and purpose. They can be based on a virtual platform or physical venue or through hybridisation.

The experience one derives from belonging to PLCs varies greatly. An effective learning community curates life-changing and enriching experiences necessary to develop an individual and a whole group of members belonging to the community (West

& Williams, 2018); while disorderly ones can invoke defensiveness, rivalry, mistrust, little learning, knowledge hoarding and unequal power relations among members (Berendsen et al., 2009; Bilginoğlu, 2019; Brodie, 2019; Looman et al., 2022; Nkambule, 2023). However, studies shedding light on the role of PLCs in mediating intergenerational relationships and knowledge-sharing practices among teaching staff within the schooling system milieus remain scant (Edge, 2014; Forde & McMahon, 2019; Portela Pruaño, Bernárdez Gómez, Marrero Galvan & Nieto Cano, 2022), especially from the perspective of principals' role. The kernel of this paper was to investigate the state of intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices in a principals' PLC at a selected South African education circuit. The paper focused on three generations of principals: Boomers II (1955–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), and Millennials (1981–1996). It informs practice by highlighting the sustainability of collaboration and collective problem-solving among individual members of the PLC, as well as identifying areas for improvement.

Link Between Sustainability and Intergenerational Professional Learning Practices

The survival of any organisation lies not only in its ability to keep workers sharing and creating knowledge but also in ensuring that the knowledge is deposited optimally into the knowledge repository of the organisation so that it can be withdrawn and re-used for generations to come. The challenge for many decades was that organisations were oblivious to the need to get workers to share their knowledge maximally (Rupčić, 2018). However, governments through public policies, rigorous research initiatives and robust academic forum discussions underscore their commitment to entrench vertical and horizontal knowledge-sharing practices among diverse worker groups (Buffel et al., 2014). Much of what has caused public policy makers to take this position stems from their apprehensions about the current composition of the public service workforce, a majority of whom near retirement (Walker & Maltby, 2012; Zaidi, Gasior, & Manchin, 2012). Tambaum (2022, p.1) asserts that "Population aging is one of this century's main challenges. Boomers II (born between 1955 and 1964), [Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980)] and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) are the most frequently targeted generations in IGL [intergenerational learning] initiatives in community settings". The high level of apprehension around the issue of an ageing workforce is sensible considering that when not addressed, it can result in them experiencing what Ermine (2010, p. 79) refers to as "knowledge crash." A knowledge crash occurs when employees have left professional service without having transferred their values, knowledge and expertise to those who are left behind.

Buffel et al (2014, p. 1786) cite Hatton-Yeo and Ohsako's (2000) description of intergenerational knowledge-learning practices as methods of achieving meaningful and continuous sharing of resources and learning experiences among members of different ages. In 2000, representatives of 10 nations converged under the banner of the United Nations Education Scientific Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to discuss strategies to mitigate the loss of tacit knowledge loss upon the departure of old employees (Buffel et al., 2014). These representatives identified the need for educational institutions to anchor their professional learning interventions by adopting the concept of sustainability in knowledge-sharing practices (ibid). Van der Klink (2023, p. 781) defines sustainability as "the ability of individuals, organisations and society to coexist over an extended period without negative repercussions, whether

environmental, economic or social." In the current industrial revolution, the concept of sustainability connotes "educational practices that contribute to a continually evolving, healthy learning ecosystem in which knowledge is co-created and shared in a community, including society, economy and environment" (Vičič Krabonja, Kustec, Skrbinjek, Aberšek & Flogie, 2024, p.3). It is implemented as a best practice for meeting of services and resources of present and future generations without afflicting damage to the integrity and lifespan of the service ecosystems of the learning community. Buffel et al (2014) cogitate that sustainability hinges on the success of intergenerational knowledge sharing on the maintenance of relational learning relationships among members of different ages within the learning community. Practising sustainability enables the back-and-forth flow of knowledge to occur easily among members of different generational gaps, under favourable supporting conditions.

Benefits of Intergenerational Knowledge-Sharing Practices in a PLC Setting

Knowledge sharing is a component of the knowledge management concept, which involves identifying and consolidating people's perspectives of knowledge to regulate rivalry and opposing views (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Hantana and Suratman (2023, p. 12) state that the importance of knowledge sharing generally lies in its two-fold dispositions, namely "knowledge donating" and "knowledge collecting." Knowledge donating entails individual workers who externalise or project their personal experiences through storytelling, demonstrative talks or the question-and-answer method. Knowledge collecting entails memorising and documenting the knowledge presented by knowledgeable workers. From the standpoint that in a school environment, the demands of principals' responsibilities keep them too busy to self-reflect on and research innovative school leadership and people management methods, belonging to a PLC would richly benefit their leadership efficacy and self-confidence in the role (Chitpin, 2014; Lieberman & Miller, 2009). It is primarily used as an exercise to "solve problems, develop new insights, or implement rules or measures" (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2018; Cummings, 2004). The following section discusses the benefits of principals' PLC membership.

With schools being "knowledge-intensive" entities endowed with a wealth of tacit knowledge residing in the minds of experienced personnel, it is of vital importance for tacit knowledge to be converted into organisation knowledge to prevent it from disappearing with them when they eventually leave their positions (Fullan, 2002). In these schools, principals are fundamentally responsible for managing the knowledge assets of their institutions, acting as the key custodians (Kazak, 2021). In that sense, professional learning is a viable platform for the *externalisation and storage of the soon-to-retire principals' tacit knowledge.* Moreover, research indicates that European countries (European Union, 2015), Australia (Owen, Kos & McKenzie, 2008) and New Zealand (Reinsfield & Lee, 2022) face the dilemma of an ageing teaching workforce. The South African public schooling system is facing a similar predicament, which needs the government's urgent resolve due to its ageing teaching workforce. A study by researchers at Stellenbosch University predicts that half of all public school teaching staff is set to retire in 10 years (Monama, 2022). This is even more prominent in the school leadership band. The 2019 Teaching and Learning International Survey found that 60% of principals were 60 years and older (TALIS, 2018).

In the absence of KM practices, when senior school leaders leave the profession, they take away their know-how skills (tacit knowledge), which were acquired over the many years of service due to the lack of knowledge-sharing culture between themselves and their newly appointed or midcareer counterparts (Kalema, Motsi & Motjolopane, 2016; Nkambule, 2023). Since knowledge sharing is an activity that enables inexperienced people to acquire knowledge and best practices from experienced people (Brătianu & Orzea, 2012; Polat & Kazak, 2015; Razak et al., 2016), PLCs have become a viable platform of ensuring that the principals of mature age transfer their tacit knowledge (skills) to novice and middle-career principals. It has proven to rescue schools from incurring skills famine (Rupčić, 2018) even after highly experienced workers have retired or permanently vacated their positions due to various life circumstances such as death, disability, or ill health. (Nkambule, 2020).

From the standpoint that knowledge sharing is a collaborative sense-making exercise (Romm & Nkambule 2022, 2024), carefully syndicated PLCs can enable the younger or novice principals to work collaboratively with the older generation to innovate school leadership and maintain common ground in this pursuit. Senge (2006, p.3) contends that well-organised PLCs become ecosystems where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together." A point of reference to this is Webster, Norwood, Waterworth and Leavey's (2023) study, which found that intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices improved adult participants' wellbeing and cognitive and social engagement, while the adolescent participants benefited through the acquisition of skills and positive self-efficacy. The findings stand to reason that joining PLCs benefits both younger and older workers.

In addition, belonging to a PLC can facilitate *the transfer of 4IR leadership skills,* which are critical for ushering the sector into 21st-century education. Moreover, South Africa is still trapped "in the fold of the Second and Third Industrial Revolutions (Jegede, 2021, para. 7)." Recognising the need to enhance the training of its personnel, the South African government has taken a positive step by including PLCs in its strategies for in-service teacher skills development. Thus principals are classified among the targeted beneficiaries of continuous professional development. Prioritising principals is commendable, especially when considering that compared to the past two decades, their job description has more than doubled in workload, time consumption, and accountability (Mkhize & Bhengu, 2018). Its scope is now inclusive of leading teaching and learning in the school; shaping the direction and development of the school; managing the quality of teaching and learning; mentoring and coaching; creating an enabling environment for learners to acquire support; managing the school as a professional and productivity-driven learning organisation; forming partnerships with communities; managing human resources (staff) in the school; and managing the provision of extra-mural activities (DBE, 2023). The quantum of their job description is informed by the World Economic Forum's (2019) six dimensions of 4IR leadership, which demand that (school) leaders ought to exude responsibility and accountability, systems leadership, technology leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, adaptive leadership and shaping societies. Within this context, PLCs extend an opportunity for members to be assimilated into the knowledge society in their sector of participation within the knowledge economy (Nkambule, 2023). In engaging in collaborative undertakings such as PLCs, principals stand to acquire skills that are crucial for enabling them to navigate the complex terrain of 21st-century school leadership successfully by

bridging the generational discord among teaching professionals (Portela Pruaño et al., 2022).

Other benefits attached to a PLC include the emotional and moral support that individual members get from one another. According to Dale-Jones (n.a, p. 53), properly managed PLCs prevent principals from "feeling disempowered, exhausted, and incapable of dealing with the stresses of these pressures" of leading a school. This view is seconded by Schechter and Feldman (2013) who state that belonging to a PLC improves a principal's coping mechanisms in challenging situations and enables them to leverage best practices. Thus global literature proves that PLC members benefit from learning through co-workers' experiences, having a support structure, collaborative decision-making and developing instructional and teaching strategies that resonate with the contexts of their schools (Admiraal et al., 2021; Awodiji & Naicker, 2024; Davis et al., 2020; Haiyan & Allan, 2021; Hudson, 2024; Isabelle & Labelle, 2017; Kazak, 2021; Mashiane-Nkabinde, 2020; Mashiane-Nkabinde et al., 2023, Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023; Schechter, 2012; Sparapani et al., 2016). More generally, PLCs provide a safe space for organisational leaders to ventilate both professional and generic issues, while improving their own learning for the benefit of their staff and learners (Battersby, 2019).

Through their PLC membership, principals can regulate "their own developmental trajectories, and to set up activities that will drive their [individual character] development," professional expertise and best practices (DBE, 2015, p. 3). In the process, they learn to adopt the mindset needed to transform education institutions into 4IR ecosystems bound by a shared sense of destiny (Schwab, 2016).

From the point of view of 4IR, sustainability in professional learning acknowledges links between technological systems, legislative frameworks, and people's know-how knowledge. Hence, nowadays, organisations employ a combination of these technologies to optimise opportunities for intergenerational knowledge-sharing, enabling each generation to have something new to offer to (or share with) the other generation. Therefore, amid demands by the Policy on The South African Standard for Principalship (2015) for principals to incorporate ICTs in their school leadership role (DBE, 2015; Sepeng & Kgwete, 2023) within a learning community, the so-called "digital natives (younger generation)" may transfer solid end user-ICT skills to the "digital immigrant" (older generation of principals) (Rupčić, 2018), while the older generation may impart to their younger counterparts, discipline-specific hard and soft skills and ethical approaches. This emulates the tenets of the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), which postulates that dissonance between separated groups may be narrowed down through increased dialogue, especially when common elements necessitate these groups' development of close cooperation.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the paper uses Wenger's community of practice (CoP). CoP as a theoretical concept postulates that "since schools and districts are organisations in their own right, and they too face increasing knowledge challenges" they ought to base their sustenance on collaborative learning (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 5). The theory underscores that for authentic learning to occur among members of the CoP, each one of them must locate their identity within the community. However, since the paper relates the concept to the schooling system, identity refers to members' professional rank (i.e. principals). Speaking within the context of the knowledge

economy, Nonaka and Takeuchi (2019) state that professionals who do not talk to one another regularly are incapable of expanding their knowledge base beyond that which they already possess. Hence the theory hypothesises that when members "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.1).

The learning referred to takes a problem-based approach through which members engage in back-and-forth knowledge sharing and sense-making about their personal experiences, and collectively develop an in-depth perspective of the problem. The theory purports that, when carried out continuously, ethically and democratically, these kinds of discussions among like-minded individuals activate processes of acquiring people's tacit knowledge and its innovation and storage (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In addition, as pointed out by Lave and Wenger (1991), members learn from each other and have greater opportunities to develop personally and professionally. More importantly, in propounding the notion of a reciprocal dialogue between knowledgeable and knowledge-seeking members and interdependency between both ends (Snyder & Wenger, 2002; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002), the theory captures the essence of the paper, which is to understand principals' intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices in a selected South African education circuit. CoP created a lens through which the researchers were able to understand how schooling systems' sustenance of shared repertoire among members (Wenger, 1998) underpinned by "a set of shared beliefs, values and attitudes favourable to learning" (OECD, 2010, p. 25) can regulate not only their collaborative learning experiences but also their individual professional efficacy and emotional wellbeing.

Research Methodology

Kadzin (2016) regards methodology as a discussion that accounts for how "the diverse principles, procedures, and practices" constitute the findings of their study while also exposing the scope of the research topic and the gaps that are not yet filled in the topic. The research methodology for this paper is discussed under several subheadings, which are listed below.

Context in research matters. As pointed out by Hinds, Chaves and Cypess (1992, p. 61), context "allows for meaning to be shared and phenomena to be understood." The study was actualised in a town called Emalahleni (a *Zulu* word for the place of coal) in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Considering the city's large population of schools and principals, the researchers decided to limit their inquiry to one (instead of three) educational circuits/regions. It is worth mentioning that the paper's data collection was focused on participants of different generations. Generation can be understood as people's age similarities and exposure to similar life developments and social events. Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Voelpel (2017) presume that people of the same generation are noticed by their closely related worldviews, values, sense of direction, approaches to doing things, and conduct. Needless to mention, in the workplace, every generation is bound by its range of values and common life experiences that set them apart from other generations (Gursoy et al., 2008). Essentially, three generations of principals, namely the Boomers II (born between 1946 and 1964), Millennials (born between 1979 and 1994) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) in a PLC at the selected education circuit were the main focus of the inquiry.

The paper was aligned with the social constructivist paradigm and qualitative research alike. The relationship between qualitative research and social constructivism is rooted in their naturalistic and human-focused nature. Qualitative research is naturally social and interpersonal in approach, dependent on observing and engaging participants' emotions (Lustick, et al., 2024). In the paper, researchers used qualitative research as they were particularly interested in understanding participants' feelings about their membership in a PLC.

The findings of the paper were derived from a sample of eight principals representing three generations (Boomers II, Generation X and Millennials) of principal participants. Four (of the eight) participants were selected via purposive sampling while the other four were included in the study via snowball sampling. Because South African school principals are, on average, 60 years and above (TALIS, 2018), the researchers asked the participants who fell within the mature age bracket to direct them to those belonging to a younger generation than them, hence the snowballing of the four younger principals. Combining purposive with snowball sampling is something qualitative researchers are accustomed to doing when needing to gain access to hard-to-reach participants of interest to them (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). Since out of the population of 34 participants who belonged to the PLC, only two were Millennials (43-year-olds), the researchers deemed it appropriate to also balance the participation ratio by drawing four participants from each of the other two generational categories, namely Boomers II (aged between 60 and 63) and Generation X (aged between 45 and 50), which culminated into eight participants. Table 1 entails the profiles of the participants in the study.

Table 1
Participants

Participant code	**Gender**	**Age**	**Generational Category**	**Experience in the role**
Pr1	Male	62	Boomer II	13
Pr2	Female	60	Boomer II	17
Pr3	Female	50	Generation X	4
Pr4	Male	61	Boomer II	11
Pr5	Male	45	Generation X	9 months (acting capacity)
Pr6	Male	43	Millennial	1 (acting capacity)
Pr7	Male	47	Generation X	3
Pr8	Female	43	Millennial	1

Semi-structured interviews of between 30 and 45 minutes took place with individual participants who each shared their convergent and divergent perspectives on their participation in a PLC at the selected education circuit. As per the norm, the interviews were guided by the interview protocol containing several open-ended questions directed at each study participant (Knox & Burkard, 2014). According to Magaldi and Berler (2020), semi-structured questions in an interview enable the interviewer to probe and ask follow-up questions upon identifying missing details in the interviewee's explanation. Literature review was also used to cross-check the consistency between the findings and extant findings on the topic. Moon (2019)

considers the comparison between research findings and extant literature as data triangulation, which he argues enhances the rigour of the research findings. Access to the participants was based on the acquisition of ethical clearance. Also, issues of anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to in terms of which alphabets were used instead of participants' names.

Data analysis was propounded by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis to facilitate the arrangement of data into findings. This process involved familiarisation, which is the first step in the process of trying to understand the meaningfulness of the data. The coding process followed, which entailed carefully highlighting the compelling words in the transcripts. Generating themes was the third step in which the researcher shaped the codes into themes. In the fourth step, themes were reviewed relative to the study's objectives. Step five dealt with minor alterations to the themes to enhance their meaningfulness and direct alignment with the research questions. The last step entailed compiling a report of the findings, as discussed below.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1. Embedding an Asset-Based Mindset

There is an expectation that principals should have a solution to most of the problems that confront their schools (Bhengu & Mkhize, 2018; Nkambule et al., 2024; Schechter & Feldman, 2013). However, this is not always the case as there are occasions where principals may lack knowledge or resources to resolve such problems. Adopting an asset-based mindset implies that within an intergenerational learning community, principals learn to leverage each other's strengths to move towards the direction of prosperity (Renkly & Bertolini, 2018). This theme encapsulates three subthemes indicating how through their membership in a PLC, principals benefited from an increased asset-based mindset.

Subtheme 1: Brainstorming

Brainstorming refers to working together to formulate strategies. Participants narrated the benefits of brainstorming in an intergenerational learning setting as follows. Pr1 who constituted one of the only two millennials in the principals' PLC, said,

> *I have been in the position since last year. So, I have not yet learned all the ropes of the position. Most of my learning comes from weekly meetings we have. There are experienced guys [i.e., senior colleagues] who have been doing this job [of leading a school] for a very long time, and they teach us a lot.*

The participant considered the knowledge gained through brainstorming helpful in her leadership role, especially since she has recently been appointed to it. On the spectrum of the Boomers II generation, Pr2 commented,

> *At first, I did not know how to do item analysis. My clerk used to do it for me. But through the tips from the youngsters in the group, I can now do it. They took us through easier ways of balancing the data.*

This participant benefited from the guidance of the younger members of the group to understand the simplest methods of balancing item analysis, which is a document containing the academic performance outlook of learners in all the grades of the school and is required by the district at the end of every academic term/quarter.

Representing Generation X, Pr7 commented,

> *I like the fact that when I have problems with learners or staff, there is usually someone who has experienced the same thing in their school.*

The participant expressed that the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of the group resulted in a better understanding of how to deal with certain problems from other members of the learning community who have gone through similar situations. This finding validates that of Portela Pruaño et al (2022) who found that relational intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices are key to addressing every member's professional challenges equally. It was evident that within the learning community, the know-how (tacit) knowledge was being shared unselfishly sharing ideas, and resulted in all members generating context-specific knowledge which enhanced their problem-solving skills (Nkambule et al., 2024).

Subtheme 2: Sharing of resources

The reality about South African schools is that most of them are under-resourced due to the disfranchisement caused by apartheid policies (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). Basic facilities such as sports fields, computer and science laboratories, libraries and school halls are not available (Nkambule, 2020). Naturally, the majority of the members within the studied PLC are principals of these schools. In relation to this issue, Pr6 commented,

> *Every beginning of the year, we ask learners to bring A4 papers for the printing of worksheets and exams, but only half of the learners bring them because their parents cannot afford it. By September all the paper are gone. I am glad that when I send a WhatsApp text to the community, they always donate enough paper to finish the year.*

Pr4 whose school is considered one of the adequately resourced schools in the area, commented,

> *We are always willing to assist in whatever way we can. Because we have better resources, we allow colleagues from other schools to make use of our machines to produce exam copies. They also use our netball and soccer fields a lot for tournaments and friendly matches.*

Pr8 concluded,

> *What I appreciate the most is that schools in town [referring to well-resourced schools] encourage their teachers to mentor my mathematics and science teachers and supply them with notes and previous examination papers.*

Much of what was said elucidates a sense of common purpose and desire to succeed among members of the community, resulting in those who are fortunate to have resources to share them with those who lack them, to help their schools remain productive. Correspondingly, Myende (2017) found that engraving an asset-based mindset in school leadership is crucial for sustaining school effectiveness.

Theme 2: Inconsistent Regulation of Group Dynamics

Co-workers of different generational gaps who engage in knowledge-sharing transactions with one another prevent the organisation from losing a wealth of much-needed organisational knowledge (Harvey, 2012; Ropes, 2013). Notwithstanding its potential organisational benefits, however, knowledge-sharing among younger and older workers can be challenging to facilitate without a hitch (Ellwart, Bündgens & Rack, 2013). This theme encapsulates two subthemes, as discussed below.

Subtheme 4: Code-switching (translanguaging)

South Africa has twelve official languages (the twelfth being the sign language). In such a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, it is important to use language to maintain a common group. Hence, in diverse work environments, English is used to bridge the language gap. Participants, however, expressed their dissatisfaction with the tendency of code-switching in knowledge-sharing practices among members of the studied PLC. Mabule (2015) defines code-switching as changing from one language to the other when conversing with others. Pr1 who can only speak English and Afrikaans, both of which are Eurocentric languages also spoken in South Africa, expressed that,

> *Other members seem to be carried away and completely forget that we exist. The code-switching issue is the only problem I have because it takes longer before the speaker changes back to English (Pr1 interview).*

In the same breath, Pr3 said,

> *I lose out a lot when serious discussions are being held about the changes in policies and protocols. There is too much vernacular being spoken around.*

With South Africa being "a multilingual country with two colonial languages (English and Afrikaans) and nine Indigenous languages (isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sotho, Northern Sotho [Sepedi], isiNdebele, Siswati, Xitsonga and Tshivenda)" (Diko, 2022, p. 123), code-switching is widely applied in people's social interactions, especially in education, where it is used to spread appreciation for linguistic diversity, mother tongue education and decoloniality (Mpofu & Ndebele, 2025). However, as enunciated by the participants, code-switching within their multi-racial PLC diminished non-vernacular speakers' ability to absorb the knowledge conveyed in vernacular languages.

Subtheme 5: Overreliance on the older generations' expert power

Knowledge sharing is generally a group-based endeavour that requires all role players to derive equal satisfaction, especially between members of different ages (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022). When asked to relay their experiences of resolving decision-making deadlocks as members of the PLC, they commented as follows,

> *The same people are asked what they think, and whatever they say goes. As for us, we must implement everything. I cannot take away the fact that they are older and wiser, but how they sometimes undermine us does not inspire confidence* (Pr6 Interview).

Pr8 emphatically added,

> *My broer! [an Afrikaans word for brother]. I feel it's worse because I am acting [in this position] and I happened to be the youngest of the bunch. I propose something, the clever ones counter the proposal, and suddenly the same thing is being said by so and so, and everybody takes it. That is why I now shut my mouth. I resolved to stop interfering when arguments happen about what decision to take.*

Pr7 concluded,

> *When we had a burglary problem in our schools, an urgent meeting was called. There I suggested how we must deal with this problem. As I looked on my left side I saw the two mkhulus (a Zulu language word for grandfathers) talking and laughing. After that, one of them raised a hand and said, "this problem needs us big guys to nip it in the butt." To me, that sounded as if he was saying my suggestion was childish.*

Much of what was inferred by the participants is an extension of the power play (Nkambule, 2023) that typifies dialogical engagements among teaching staff (Zulu, 2012). The finding indicated that whenever there were stalemates in decision making, the youngest members of the learning community (belonging to the Millennial category) felt that their contributions were being second-guessed in favour of the older generation, who are presumed to possess expert power by virtue of their professional and life experience.

Conclusion

Intergenerational knowledge sharing engenders mutual learning between members of different generational gaps. Its proper application has the propensity to amalgamate, enhance, and construct knowledge, wisdom, skills, competencies, attitudes, norms, and values across generations (Shih, 2024; Vodopivec, Partalo, & Šindić, 2022). Having noted that researchers do not pay enough attention to understanding social comparison between younger and older workers from the KM point of view in professional settings, the kernel of the paper was to investigate intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices in a principals' PLC at a selected South African education circuit. Eight participants of different generational orientations, namely the Boomers II (1955 – 1964), Millennials (1981 – 1996) and Generation X (1965 – 1980) were interviewed. The final outlook of the thematic analysis demonstrated that participants considered intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices in their PLC as having entrenched an asset-based mindset, enabling co-workers to capitalise on each other's strengths to develop best practices. The paper elicited that applying an asset-based mindset enabled them to learn from each other and bridge skills gaps while also addressing misconceptions to bridge the discord affecting their professional relationships. As such, the culture of knowledge sharing within the studied PLC, was such that members engaged in meaningful brainstorming and jointly came up with context-specific problem-solving strategies/knowledge. Over and above that, affiliation to the learning community facilitated the sharing and mobilisation of resources; this was evident in how members of adequately resourced

schools extended a helping hand to fellow members whose schools lacked basic resources to carry out certain functions.

However, because knowledge transactions involve people of different personalities, it emerged that there were minor (but costly) power imbalances that may require to be addressed. It was indicated that code-switching, which denotes changing from one language to the other within one discussion, precluded a minority of members who cannot speak local Indigenous languages from fully absorbing information shared in those languages. The second barrier, as expressed by the youngest members of the PLC (i.e. Millennials), was caused by overreliance on the older generations' (i.e., the Boomers II and Generation X) expert power whenever complex decisions needed to be made, leaving the former feeling sidelined in key decision-making processes. The barriers illuminated above point to inconsistent regulation of group dynamics. Despite these minor setbacks, there was a general sense that co-dependency among members kept the PLC afloat and curated meaningful intergenerational knowledge-sharing and other KM processes.

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All correspondence related to this paper should be addressed to Bongani Nkambule* e-mail: nkambbi@unisa.ac.za; Institute for Open and Distance Learning, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa, ORCID: 0000-0001-9022-0960