

Professional Learning Communities in Schools: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract Existing paradigms of professional development seem to undermine the rich wealth of experiences that teachers have in the schools. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are designed to encourage teachers to look closely into their contexts and develop relevant courses of actions towards their concerns. The present study aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school teachers and school administrators in the Philippines while implementing PLCs. Interviews and focus group discussions involving 40 teachers and 24 school heads and head teachers from four different schools were transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. Results reveal that there are four primary challenges experienced by the teachers in participating to PLCs: overloads and time conflicts, low trust towards fellow teachers, conflict with ranking and promotion schemes, and failure to appreciate benefits of participation. These challenges are rooted in the school operations and school culture. In terms of opportunities, the following themes are identified: enriched learning strategies and materials, support for new hires, better interaction between school heads and teachers, and more contextualized discussions of school and student concerns. These opportunities can be explored by school heads in improving the quality of professional development activities implemented in the school. Results also pose challenge to school heads on how to better engage the teachers into participating into PLCs to maximize the opportunities.

Keywords Professional Learning Communities, Teacher Engagement, Collegial Trust

1. Introduction

The rise of emerging technologies and learning paradigms has called for educational revolution around the

world. New competencies are seen to be more relevant as schools become more engaged into matching their programs to the social and economic needs. In effect, schools have begun transforming their facilities and equipped their teachers with skills and knowledge needed to deliver the innovative curriculum. In the Philippines, the introduction of the K-12 program, which added two years in the basic education program, called for the training of teachers. This aimed not only to acquaint them of the significant curricular reform but also to retool them with the strategies that they use in teaching. The TPACK model, for instance, encourages teachers to obtain a triangulation of content, pedagogy, and technological skills [1].

Previous paradigms of professional development among teachers is pictured with an invited expert talking about a particular topic. During these sessions, the expert discusses principles and concepts while the teachers listen and interact with the speaker. In many cases, workshops are incorporated in the activity and teachers brainstorm about a topic. After that, the teachers present their outputs for critiquing. These trainings are appreciated because of the opportunities that they provide to interact with experts in the field and teachers from different schools. Sharing of experiences from different contexts allow the teachers to have a wider perspective towards the topic. However, Hallinger, Piyaman, and Visheshiri (2017) argue that such kind of activity most of the time fail to address the actual needs of the teachers [2]. While many teachers may feel the relevance of the skills and knowledge that they have acquired, they fail to apply these to their own classrooms. In the end, teachers develop the attitude of superficial participation towards these activities.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) evolved because of the need to have an avenue for teachers to discuss their issues and concerns in the school setting [3]. These have been seen as appropriate measures to address the weaknesses of the existing paradigm for professional learning. With the discussions being brought down to the schools, teachers navigate the strengths and limitations of

their own contexts and eventually develop a tailor fit solution for their concerns. The present study aimed to explore the experiences of teachers in participating in professional learning communities. The challenges and opportunities experienced by teachers in these PLCs may provide insights on the formulation of more relevant policies for schoolheads and administrators.

2. Literature Review

Professional learning communities (PLCs) tap on the resources of schools in investigating concerns and use these same resources in framing courses of actions [4]. Apart from the facilities and equipment that may be considered in the decision-making, the significant wealth of ideas and experiences of the teachers are to be tapped in developing relevant programs for the school. The typical paradigm of attending trainings and seminars conducted outside the school cannot maximize these as organizers usually have a big number of unique participants. At most, the vocal participants may dominate the discussion and neglect the concerns of other participants.

School heads play vital roles in the establishment and propagation of PLCs [5]. The leadership's style of the school head can either encourage or discourage the open and free flow of ideas from among the teachers and administrators. Little (2012) noted that school heads that employ learning-centered style in management tend to have better chances of successfully implementing PLCs. School heads can set up the environment for communal learning, in which teachers learn through the sharing of experiences from other teachers. This further intensifies the other requirements for PLCs to thrive such as teacher efficacy [6][7] and collegial trust [8][9].

PLCs have led to the empowerment of teachers to become change agents in schools [10]. Because of the increased accountability and engagement of teachers to policy-making and implementation, they become reliant with their ability to lead and steer the direction of the school. In this setup, the school head lays down the overarching goal of the school and expects the teacher-leaders to perform their functions aligned to the established goals. Sargent and Hannum (2009) even noted that such school model allowed teachers to initiate programs that enabled them to bridge gap in students' achievement despite the apparent constraints in resources [11]. Instead of the school heads being given the responsibility of locating additional funding sources, teachers become empowered to improvise and work together to achieve the goal without much financial strains on the school administration. A critical review to PLCs reveals that successful implementation can lead to greater motivation among teachers, positive attitude towards learning, and better student performance [12].

PLCs undoubtedly could railroad a better school culture

with the emphasis on the collaboration between and among teachers and school administrators. However, establishing a PLC and encouraging communal learning appear to require several conditions. As evidenced from literature, the school head must be willing to provide an opportunity for teachers to initiate activities and discussions. This includes giving the teachers the time and avenue to lead other teachers. Further, PLCs require significant amount of trust among the teachers. Liu and Hallinger (2017) asserted that teacher trust can serve as a mediator between school leadership and professional development among teachers [13]. This suggests that while school heads may promote PLCs through relevant policies and programs, teachers still need to cultivate trust to their colleagues for communal learning to take place.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a phenomenological approach in capturing the experiences of the respondents. It has been apparent from existing literature that the study of communal learning requires a deep and thorough understanding of the context of the group. While the social learning theory of Bandura attempts to provide a general framework for the study of communal learning through the concept of an individual imitating the actions of another, the theory assumes that individuals would automatically imbibe whatever is observed from the environment [14]. In this context, the use of phenomenology to understand how the respondents engage into communal learning through PLCs is justified as actual experiences can provide more extensive details on the subject. Flowerday and Schraw (2000) asserted that phenomenological studies can be implemented when there is still limited information available about the topic [15]. By gathering information from the Asian sample, it is probable that new ideas can be drawn to better comprehend the mechanism by which communal learning can actually take place.

3.2. Data Sources

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to gather information from the respondents. These data were then analyzed for recurring themes. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed. Initial themes from existing literature were used in classifying the responses. Emerging themes were integrated to fully represent the ideas coming from the respondents.

3.3. Participants

Forty secondary teachers and 24 head teachers and

school heads participated in the study. This sample were representative of four schools. These schools were chosen to participate in the study because of their early effort to implement professional learning communities. The schools have been implementing PLCs for at least a year prior to the conduct of the study. The PLCs took the form of faculty meetings presided by the school head or teacher-leaders. In most cases, the PLCs were described as informal discussions that teachers organize to discuss school matters such as students' achievement, classroom activities, and learning concerns. The four school heads included in the study have been assigned in the school for at least two years. The group of teachers was represented by new hires and seasoned teachers. This provided diverse perspective in the implementation of PLCs.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of eight themes were noted to represent the challenges and opportunities in implementing PLCs from among the participants. For the challenges, the following themes were recurring during the interviews and group discussions: overloads and time conflicts, low trust towards fellow teachers, conflict with ranking and promotion schemes, and failure to appreciate benefits of participation.

4.1. Challenges in Implementing PLCs

4.1.1. Overloads and Time Conflicts

PLC meetings are usually scheduled at a particular day within the week. These meetings usually last for one to two hours. Teachers reported that while a specific time has been allocated for these meetings, some of them would opt to skip their attendance as they have other activities to do. Instead of spending time for these meetings, teachers would opt to use their time doing students' consultation, preparing instructional materials, or evaluating students' outputs. School heads have voiced their sentiments by stating that the numerous clerical tasks assigned to teachers are often used as excuses for not attending learning sessions. While school heads encourage their teachers by making the sessions brief, teachers are often noticed to be distracted, thus could not fully participate during the discussions.

4.1.2. Low Trust towards Fellow Teachers

Learning sessions are meant to provide opportunities for teachers to share their experiences and best practices in handling students. Some schools have organized demonstration sessions in which one or two teachers will show how a particular teaching strategy or classroom management technique can be employed. Other teachers can then provide their insights and recommendations. In several instances, these learning sessions are also used to showcase instructional materials that were developed by

teachers. Some sessions are dedicated for the discussion of students' achievement and what other teachers are doing to support their students. While these sessions seem to be ideal for PLCs, a few teachers are hesitant to take the helm during these sessions. One of the enduring characteristics of successful PLCs in schools is the rise of teacher-leaders who could direct learning sessions. Some teachers are hesitant to share their materials with other teachers for the fear of criticism. An unfortunate story was narrated by one of the teachers:

“A teacher used to show to other teachers her slides. She was proud because her students had quite positive response whenever she uses the material. However, when she presented the material to the group, a few teachers started to give comments on the appearance, color choice, and even the content. From then on, she rarely showed others her materials. It is unfortunate because she is invited to provide trainings in other schools, but she was not appreciated during our learning session.”

4.1.3. Conflict with Ranking and Promotion Schemes

Another reason for the hesitation of teachers to share ideas and materials during learning sessions is the fear that other teachers may pick up on these ideas and use them for their own ranking and promotion. Ranking and promotion is based on the accomplishments of the teachers, such as the production and use of innovative teaching materials. A few teachers feared that somebody will use their idea before they can even do the paperwork. Towards the end of the academic year, teachers are expected to submit their portfolio in which all of their accomplishments are reported. Teachers are anxious that if they have a good idea on how to solve a certain problem in the classroom and shares it to the group, other teachers may claim credit for such. In effect, teachers would rather implement the idea on their classrooms and report it at the end of the year.

4.1.4. Failure to Appreciate Benefits of Participation

The Department of Education has used its mandate to encourage schools to participate in cultivating PLCs. In fact, learning sessions can be considered as seminars, which account for the professional points needed in renewal of licenses for teachers. However, participation in some cases remain superficial as a few teachers have noted that their colleagues are in the session simply to sign the attendance sheet. After signing the attendance sheet, they leave and never be seen again the entire day. School heads and head teachers are designing mechanisms to ensure that teachers remain throughout the learning sessions, such as providing snacks, allocating specific time for sessions, shortening the sessions, and the like. However, active participation and even mere attendance remain to be a challenge. A few teachers would use their clerical duties as excuses for not attending the session. Yet, when checked, these teachers are nowhere to be found in the school

campus.

One of the recurring reasons that teachers provide for their lack of interest in these learning sessions is the irrelevance of the activities done in the session. For instance, learning sessions are often used to simply disseminate memoranda coming from the district office. In other cases, the school head would use the learning session to reprimand other teachers. Compounded by the hesitation of some teachers to share ideas, the learning sessions serve as a venue for the school head and head teachers to cascade directives and not really encourage lively discussions about the issues and concerns of the school and the students.

4.2. Opportunities in Implementing PLCs

Despite the many challenges in the implementation of PLCs, there are several opportunities that were recognized. These have enriched learning strategies and materials, support for new hires, better interaction between school heads and teachers, and more contextualized discussions of school and students' concerns.

4.2.1. Enriched Learning Strategies and Materials

In schools where free discussion of ideas has flourished, teachers have seen significant change in the way they deliver their instruction. There are schools that have even started creating a collection of learning materials that are made accessible for all teachers. Senior teachers have recognized the technical assistance provided by younger teachers in the use of technology. A few teachers narrated how their colleagues have begun to use online storage drives to share their files with other teachers. Senior teachers were also eager to guide the younger teachers in managing their classes and dealing with difficult students and parents.

Teachers also found learning sessions to be efficient venues for them to talk about integration of topics across disciplines. A science teacher noted that she has never considered integrating physical education in teaching physics. But after discussions with the physical education teacher, they were able to develop a unit plan in which the laws of motion were taught using various sports.

“The students were quite eager to participate during the discussion. The physical education teacher allowed me to use the covered court and even gave me some videos that he uses in class. In a typical day, we would never might have discussed academic matters because I feel that his discipline is very different from mine.”

Learning sessions have also been instrumental in coming up with innovative programs in the school. The usual practice is for the head teachers to facilitate the same activities and programs every year. However, when more teachers became engaged in the planning process through the learning sessions, there were more ideas coming into the picture.

4.2.2. Support for New Hires

Starting in a new school is cognitively demanding. More so, it requires the new hires to familiarize themselves with the people in the school. Learning sessions go beyond mere introducing the new teachers to the faculty members and school administrators. In one school, they were able to establish a strong mentoring system in which each new hire is assigned with one senior faculty member who would assist them in preparing forms and documents. A learning session is also dedicated in acquainting them with the school policies and procedures. During this session, the head teachers, senior teachers, and teacher-leaders have their own matters to discuss. This allows the new hires to interact and freely discuss their queries about the school. Since learning sessions need not to be formalize in a scheduled gathering, teachers can also provide technical assistance whenever they find themselves in the faculty room. The open atmosphere allowed the new hires to cope with the school culture and somewhat lessen the tension that they feel in the workplace.

The availability of materials created by other teachers also proved to be helpful in lessening the preparation time for the new hires. Typically, new hires begin from nothing as they are usually given the curriculum guide and nothing else. However, in schools where PLCs have flourished, materials have been made available in the school head's office and can be accessed by the teachers. These would include instructional materials, lesson plans, and even sample forms.

4.2.3. Better Interaction between School Heads and Teachers

Successful PLCs in schools have revolutionized the learning sessions from mere seminars in which an expert is invited to talk about school concerns to a coaching session in which teachers help each other explore their concerns and propose solutions based on their experiences. Such acknowledgment of the contribution of every teacher breeds better communication between them and the school administrators. In schools where PLCs are still struggling to be established, conflicts between teachers and school heads are hinted as the latter often fails to connect with the former. At the same time, teachers feel that there is no need to voice out their concerns as the school administrators would not appreciate hearing these sentiments anyway.

When there is a free exchange of ideas during the learning sessions, the school heads become more aware of the actual operations of the school. This is not to say that the school head can resolve all concerns, but it makes the teachers feel that they are valued and their ideas are considered during the formulation of plans for the school and the students.

4.2.4. More Contextualized Discussion of School and Student Concerns

Previous paradigms of professional learning have been

criticized because of their lack of context. When teachers are sent to trainings and seminars outside the school, they usually question whether such skills that they have acquired can actually be used in their schools. While experts attempt to provide realistic examples during the seminars, they cannot possibly address all the contexts that revolve around a certain issue. This puts the idea that every school is a unique entity. Being such, problems arising in the schools are anchored heavily on the context, which are often not the concerns of the training expert. Cultivating the culture of PLCs in schools brings the context in the discussion. Teachers are aware of why and how a certain issue came to be; thus, they are likely to propose better solution for these concerns. Teachers do not, however, oppose their attendance to seminars outside the school; however, they feel that learning sessions benefit them more because discussions lead to feasible solutions to address their concerns. One teacher noted that he has already attended several seminars and trainings on how to reduce the absenteeism and tardiness of his students, but none of the suggestions from experts seems to work for his class. During a learning session, he learned of a strategy used by one of his colleagues and decided to try it out. He worked with his colleague in designing the plan and consulted him every now and then. At the end of the quarter, the tardiness in the class reduced by more than half.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to describe the experiences of secondary teachers and school administrators in implementing PLCs. It has been revealed by the respondents that there are challenges to be addressed and opportunities to be explored in the implementation of PLCs. Among the challenges identified were overloads and time conflicts, low trust towards colleagues, conflict with ranking and promotion schemes, and failure to appreciate benefits of participation. These challenges can be rooted from various aspects of the school operation such as the scheduling and loading. However, greater emphasis can be given on the influence of the school culture towards communal learning. The existing paradigm of professional development in which teachers are passive recipients of skills and knowledge from experts has made some teachers adamant from trusting themselves and their colleagues in matters that concern their classroom instruction and management. The lack of trust towards both the school administrators and fellow teachers impedes the propagation of an open dialog in the school. In effect, concerns that could have been addressed by collegial discussions are rendered difficult and unresolvable.

Despite these challenges, opportunities are still seen as more and more teachers are becoming engaged into PLCs. Increased support towards fellow teachers, including new

hires, and even towards school administration, are observed for schools that have successfully implemented PLCs. The contextualized discussions of concerns have resulted in higher engagement among the teachers. Teacher-leaders were also empowered to organize activities and participate actively in supporting their colleagues in different aspects of instruction and classroom management.

The present study revealed significant highlights on how teachers and school administrators are implementing PLCs. Because formalized PLCs appear to be still in its emerging state in the Philippines, it is a challenge to formulate a singular encompassing definition on how it is to be implemented or design. In the sample taken for this study, PLCs range from mere meetings conducted by the school heads to informal conversations that teachers have pertinent to school matters. Future studies may center on the technicalities of how PLCs thrive within the context of school operations to better grasp the school head perspective of implementing PLCs.

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