

Professional Learning Communities in Singapore Schools

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This paper describes a state-led initiative that aims to instil a co-operative approach to teacher learning through the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in Singapore schools. These Professional Learning Communities bring teachers together to collaborate in communities of reflective practitioners. The paper outlines the background leading to the implementation of this programme, the vision that underpinned the initiative and its practical realisation. The research findings concerning the effectiveness of the Professional Learning Communities initiative provide insights into the process and outcomes. Improvement in teacher professional development is believed to be deeply rooted in the reflective dialogues that emerge in these shared learning contexts made possible by the Professional Learning Communities.

What is a Professional Learning Community?

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a community of practitioners who come together to engage in continuous cycles of inquiry-based teacher learning (DuFour et al, 2010; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hord, 1997; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006). It involves teachers co-operatively engaged in (a) problem-based identification of challenges to student learning (Campbell, 2005; McLaughlin, 1992; Webster-Wright, 2009), (b) collecting data from students to lend a contextualised understanding to these problems, (c) joint-reflection of new ideas acquired from the data to monitor their understanding of this knowledge as peers (Fullan, 1993; Fullan, 2007; Schon, 1983; Vescio et al, 2007), and finally (d) finding meaning and relevance of this knowledge by adapting and applying it to update teaching practice (McLaughlin, 1992; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006; Vescio et al, 2007). There are no hard-and-fast rules as to how PLCs are to be enacted in practice. Teams may commence with tangible outcomes in mind, such as joint problem-solving on issues they encounter in classroom management, or pool efforts for the improvement of pedagogy and curriculum. Other PLCs might engage in collaborative professional learning in the form of deep and meaningful reflective dialogues on student learning issues, knowledge co-construction networks, and/or the building of professional cultures and networks of peers and mentors. Additionally, some teams of educators may view PLCs as venues where novices gain knowledge from experts, while others see learning as two-way between novices and experts. As the initiative gains momentum, PLCs are catching the attention of state governments committed to education reforms. Three notable large-scale PLC movements have emerged in the United Kingdom, the United States and Singapore.

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The general impression of how policy initiatives take root in Singapore is one of pervasive state guidance in all realms of Singapore society (Brown, 1994); subsumed under the Ministry of Education, the education realm is no exception. Given this impression, we suggest that the history of how the PLC has taken root in Singapore began with the then Minister of Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen's, announcement of the plan to enhance teacher professionalism via PLCs at the 2009 Work Plan Seminar (Ng, 2009). As coherence is critical in large-scale implementations, the ministry had opted for PLCs as the preferred choice collaborative learning model, being that clearly articulated frameworks for the movement are widely published (see DuFour et al, 2010; Hord, 1997), and evidence of its success has been manifest in large-scale

studies (see Bolam et al, 2005; Harris and Jones, 2011). However, it should not necessarily be assumed that practitioners on the ground (eg teachers) are unaware of wider initiatives, such as PLCs, that support teacher professional learning; for example, there is evidence of prior PLC practice presented in Foo and Lee's conference proceedings at the Asia Pacific Education Research Association (APERA) conference in 2008 (Foo and Lee, 2008). The proceedings present initial PLC efforts in Singapore's East Zone schools, using pre-existing practices such as lesson study, learning circles and action research as launch pads. However, we maintain that endorsement by ministerial authority is critical for the sustainability of initial efforts such as these. Complementary to this perceived legitimisation is the support offered by state-affiliated bodies, such as the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST). Under the Minister's instruction, the AST launched a PLC initiative in 51 pilot schools in Singapore (2009), and subsequently reviewed the effectiveness of this implementation the following year. East Zone schools' PLCs were then merged with the wider network of collaborations under the AST's leadership. Today, almost all Singapore schools, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry, are collaborators within the PLC initiative.

How PLCs Work in Singapore

In order to ensure programme coherence, the AST provided a vision of what was involved in the adoption of PLCs in practice. School leaders were to keep this vision in mind and were given the autonomy to adapt the programme implementation to accommodate the diverse learning needs of their teachers. The AST's vision of PLCs comprises a conceptual framework of the "Three Big Ideas" inspired by DuFour (Ministry of Education, 2010: 7-10): (a) "ensuring that students learn", (b) "building a culture of collaboration", and (c) "focusing on student outcomes". The central precepts are built upon Fullan's views of the supportive conditions for PLCs (Ministry of Education, 2010: 6): (a) "deep pedagogy" (ie teachers should deepen teaching and learning capacities), (b) "systemness" (ie working within the structural affordances available within the schools in which they teach), and (c) "school leadership" (ie school leaders should support teachers in this endeavour). Furthermore, schools were given suggestions on the practical aspects of organising PLCs, the most frequently reiterated being: (a) keeping the purpose of PLCs in mind (ie a platform where reflective dialogues take place for the purpose of pooling collaborative efforts to enhance teaching and learning, (b) not using PLC time as time for departmental administration), (c) keeping the learning team at a manageable size (ie not more than 7-8 members), and (d) customising professional learning to school contexts (Harris and Jones, 2011).

PLC Research in Singapore

During the first evaluation of PLCs, which was conducted at the 51 pilot schools, it was found that a gap existed between theory and practice (Hairon and Dimmock, 2012). Three potential implementation difficulties were identified: (a) high teacher workloads, (b) ambiguity of PLC processes and their efficacy, and (c) bureaucracy and red-tape that hindered autonomous teacher professional development. Contextual barriers, such as school leadership styles and the perceived overly centrist implementation of PLCs, were cited as systems-level obstacles to effective PLCs.

Currently, the initiative involves more than 300 collaborating Singapore schools. As no system-wide empirical study has yet been carried out to investigate the processes and outcomes of PLCs, a mixed-methods study, A value-mediated approach to profiling professional learning communities in Singapore schools, was conducted to establish a baseline understanding of PLC practices in Singapore schools and the contextual conditions that supported these practices (Lee et al, 2013).

To date, a number of the key findings have emerged from this study (Lee et al, 2013). A range of indicators were used as measurements of teacher engagement in PLC activities (ie

Co-operative Learning, Reflective Dialogue, Student Learning and Student Outcomes), and scored according to teacher self-reports. According to these teacher self-reports from 96 of the participating schools, teachers who were more exposed to co-operative learning approaches and who actively reflected upon the conversations that had occurred during PLC time reported higher levels of PLC engagement than those who reported otherwise. In other words, firstly, teachers who jointly contribute to professional learning in PLCs (ie co-operate and collaborate), and secondly, teachers who monitor the underpinning rationale that informs professional learning in PLCs are inclined to find PLC-style professional development more fulfilling.

Ethnographic observations were conducted in seven schools selected from the sample of 96 schools that had participated in the survey. The seven schools were selected based on the level of reported PLC engagement by the schools' teams. Of the 11 teams from the seven schools, four teams reported higher levels of PLC engagement, while six teams reported lower levels of PLC engagement. Results from observations of teachers confirmed the self-reports within the survey. Teams selected for observations from those with high levels of engagement in PLC activity levels were seen to demonstrate stronger capacities for Reflective Dialogues. Members enjoyed more room for negotiation at influencing the learning direction of the team. While all higher engagement teams and some of the lower engagement teams were observed to show strong commitment to student learning, some of the lower engagement teams were observed to use PLC time to sort out departmental administration, and/or had very limited room for the expression of views that diverged from those of the team leader.

Conclusion

By outlining the key attributes of PLCs in Singapore schools, we hoped to illuminate upon how the Singapore movement had taken shape. In the process, we have highlighted the key attributes bolstering co-operative learning among teachers. Teachers are more inclined to find PLC-style professional development more fulfilling if they are actively involved in jointly (ie they co-operate and collaborate) contributing to the enrichment of each other's learning. In other words, the replication of unidirectional learning paradigms (ie from experts to novices) in PLCs may neutralise what the movement aspires to achieve. PLCs provide opportunities for deep learning if teachers actively co-create knowledge by monitoring the underpinning rationale that informs professional learning. That is, by relating to each other as peers, teachers countercheck each other through the systematic and rigorous engagement in reflective dialogues. Effective PLCs depart from paradigms where learning is perceived as the passive reception of knowledge. Although there is much to be desired, it is important to bear in mind that PLC is only a professional development vehicle, a means to an end of developing a teacher-led professionalism. Ultimately, PLCs need to retain their substantive character of sustaining teacher commitment through higher professional aspirations. The initiative needs to keep in mind the importance of student learning as an integral part of teacher professional development. By placing student learning at the core of PLCs, it is hoped that teachers will come to develop the passion of taking charge of own professional learning, with the belief that collaboration in this endeavour will enhance one's capacity to support the learning of the students they care about.

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