PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A CHANGE AGENT FOR IMPROVING TEACHER AND STUDENT OUTCOMES IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN VIETNAM.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the progress of a research project currently underway in Vietnam as part of a Masters in Education study program with the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Using a phenomenological case study method, the project examines how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can contribute to improvements in pedagogical methodology, professionalism and student performance in an international primary school in Hanoi particularly in light of the transitory nature of teaching staff in the international school sector. From the most basic PLC of subject teachers to internationally linked and networked PLCs, the research examines how a commitment to resource and expertise sharing can prove beneficial in improving teacher morale, motivation, pedagogy and student outcomes. The present study examines and documents the developmental process of moving from no formally structured PLC’s to three vibrant groups of professional practitioners sharing, collaborating and establishing collegial support systems that underpin improved outcomes. By unpacking the documentation of the associated teachers’ lived experiences and learning journeys when developing their PLCs, this paper will provide some opportunities to consider
how Professional Learning Communities contribute to improved teaching and learning in educational/school settings.

**BACKGROUND**

The research method used in this project was the Phenomenological Case Study wherein the primary researcher produced an account from the ‘inside’ the case as a participant.

Phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and strives to explore in detail what the experience for the participants is like and what sense a particular person is making of what is happening to them. The primary researcher in the present study was a teacher working in Hanoi and as well as the one who gathered and analyzed the data, he was a participant in the case study.

The school in which the present research was conducted is a bilingual international school in Hanoi, Vietnam. Prior to 2011, there were no formally structured Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at the school. Three year-level PLCs were created at the start of the academic year in 2011 when the primary researcher commenced as Head of Studies. The three PLCs were implemented with the aim of providing an opportunity for teachers to formally share successful classroom practices and allow mentoring and clinical supervision to take place (Glickman, 1988; Glickman & Gordon, 1987; Harrison, 2004).

**PLCs - PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Peter Senge (1992) emphasizes personal mastery of each individual as a fundamental aspect of learning organizations. As each individual learns more and masters the job at hand, more
value is added to the organization. Senge further argues that it is in the best interests of any organization to have a constantly learning workforce seeking to master the job at hand and endeavoring to continue to improve upon it. A premise of PLCs in any organization is that involved individuals have a desire to grow, learn, improve and develop. In the instance of PLCs in schools, involved teachers are characterized as individuals imbued with a view of learning as a professional and essential, daily function and even more-so, a life-long endeavor (Halverson, 2010; Hargreaves, 2000; Mitchell, Sackney, & Imants, 2002; Stoll & Temperley, 2009).

Senge (1992) also emphasizes life-long learning as an important aspect of an organization and especially of a learning organization such as a school (Andrews & Lewis, 2004; Cheng, 2000; Withrow, 1999). It is fundamental for the contemporary teacher to be a learner. As the old proverb goes, “It is better to teach a man to fish than to give him a fish.” When teachers are learners themselves, they are able to pass their passion for learning on to their students (Brodbelt, 1983; Rossbach, 2000).

The current field of teacher research and development is rendering such rhetoric as “global citizens,” ‘digital citizens,’ ‘reflective practitioners,’ ‘life-long learners,’ ‘problem solvers’ and ‘professional learning communities’ as modern practices. Reflective practitioners and life-long learners are becoming the hallmarks of a successful collaborative teaching staff agenda (Friend & Cook, 2007).

Opportunities to promote reflective practice as an essential dimension of teaching can be provided through PLCs which are planned as spaces and times for teachers to come together, reflect on their work and learn from one each other. While reflective practice is deemed to be part of a teacher’s day to day activities (Bolton, 2001; Kraft, 2002) and is something every teacher does naturally at the end of every lesson or unit of work, Walkington, Christensen
and Kock (2001) argue that the process of reflective practice should become a standard and dedicated practice at all schools. PLCs provide a regular timeslot for dedicated teacher learning and professional reflection to take place.

According to Stoll and Louis (2007), the term ‘Professional Learning Community’ suggests that focus is not just on individual teachers’ learning but on (1) professional learning; (2) cohesive group dynamics; (3) collective knowledge, and (4) an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of all teachers, students and school culture.

The abovementioned four aspects of a PLC are important to keep the PLC on task in order to improve learning among teachers which in turn impacts on students and school leaders in a caring and supportive way. Fullan’s (1985) three phases of change provide a structure for monitoring the PLC process from initiation to ‘maturity’ of a PLC (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE 1</th>
<th>Initiation</th>
<th>Staff adopt an innovation by making a decision to proceed with change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>PHASE 2</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Staff begin to operationalize the innovation into practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHASE 3</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>The innovation is recognized as an ongoing part of the system or the ‘way things are done around here’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Fullan’s Three Phases of Change

It should be the intention of every PLC to move from the initiation to the institutionalization phase. Within ‘mature’ PLCs, the task of improving learning among students, teachers and school leaders becomes the norm of ‘how things are done around here.’ When professional learning through reflection (reflective practice) becomes the norm, teachers do not feel threatened by having their work critiqued or fearful of entering into a learning relationship
Developing a culture of reflective practice and life-long learning underpins the esprit de corps of PLCs.

**EXTENDING PLCs**

Stoll and Louis (2007) believe PLCs should include more than teachers alone.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 1 – The broader PLC**

Figure 1 depicts how PLCs potentially can become bigger than a basic Home Group. Stoll and Louis (2007) advocate for school administrators, support staff such as special needs assistants, teaching aids, librarians and all other teaching staff to be involved in PLCs. They go on to recommend the involvement of non-teaching staff such as secretaries, office administrators, cleaning staff and nurses.

From this perspective PLCs further can be extended outside the immediate school to internationally networked learning communities. A networked learning community (NLC), just like a professional learning community (PLC) facilitates professional learning
opportunities on a bigger scale. They are a form of larger professional group that meets externally or face-to-face, virtually, online.

**DEVELOPING SCHOOL CULTURE**

Organizational culture is a very important aspect of any business including schools (Driscoll & Morris, 2001; Hoy & Miskel, 1987; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Lakomski, 2001; Marshall, 1993; Ogbonna & Harris, 1998; Schein, 2000). Organizational culture refers to a number of aspects of work environment including climate or “how things are done around here.” Culture has an extremely influential impact on the workplace (Palmer, 2007), both positive and/or negative. Positive culture may include pride in wearing a school uniform, celebrations at school assemblies, parties for teachers or family support for functions. In contrast school culture can be impacted negatively by the teaching profession itself. This might manifest in the language used by teachers in a school e.g. hearing teachers say things like, “I’m just a teacher,” “Because the boss says so,” and “Things never change around here,” are all examples of language expected in a school with a negative culture (Durre, 2010).

According to Durre (2010) negative cultures breed toxic workplaces which have a number of demonstrable characteristics. Some of these might include for example, employees doing the work of two or three people and being paid one salary, receiving little to no appreciation or thanks, falsified data in reports or documents, making formal complaints to the human resource department without anything changing. Durre (2010) believes that if only one point of the above examples (which are taken from a list of thirty five) is evident in a school, then the workplace is prone to be a toxic one.
If such elements exist in the workplace they will also be evident in PLCs. PLCs provide time when teachers come together in small groups, away from their students and removed from the isolation of their classroom. While there is always the likelihood that the PLCs may become used as a forum to air grievances, that is one major reason why the coming together of teachers allows the air to be cleared and solutions to be found, and for toxic elements to be revealed and addressed. While grievance-airing and issue-bashing can become detrimental in bogging PLCs down, such elements are regulated and instead of becoming the most important topic to employees (and thus further develop the toxic culture) Bloomfield (2003) suggests that a no-blame culture is important as the guiding protocol for PLCs.

Andrews and her colleagues (2004) introduced a “no-blame” policy during their initial PLC development. This norm was clearly explained to participants and then became the norm for meetings. By beginning with this policy it provided a clear foundation upon which to build a culture of trust and open dialogue. Toxic cultures are a danger to every workplace and an important issue to be addressed when building a positive organizational culture (McGregor, 1960; Morgan, 1989; Schein, 2001).

DATA GATHERING

At first, the PLC meetings in the present study took place after school hours or during lunchtime. However, Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1994) advise “it’s not enough for a school’s leadership to simply tack another period [meeting] onto the end of a workday that is already long and tiring. Such periods must be built into the school’s schedule and calendar in a way that gives teachers opportunities to consider critical issues in a reflective manner” (1994, p. 5). Time allocation for the PLCs in the present study was therefore added to the school’s timetable in August 2012.

Three different PLCs were established.
Table 2. Participant list

The first group consisted of three Grade Three teachers. The second group consisted of four Grade Four teachers and the third group consisted of three Grade Five teachers and the primary researcher. The data came from three sources:

1. The primary researcher’s diary
2. Anonymous questionnaires
3. Semi-structured interviews

Categorizing strategies (themes)

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) the existing literature on analysis in phenomenology has not prescribed a single method for working with data. Different phenomenologists choose different ways to analyze the data. For the present project a structure set out by the above mentioned authors and similar to the methodology suggested by Van Manen (1984) was chosen.

The analysis was carried out in six steps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Reading and re-reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Initial noting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Developing emergent themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Searching for connections across emergent themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Moving to the next case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Looking for patterns across cases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. The phenomenological analysis process
Step 1 reading and re-reading involved reading over the anonymous questionnaires and transcribed interviews. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) believe that to begin the process of entering the participant’s world it is important to enter a phase of active engagement with the data. This involved a lot of reading and re-reading of the transcripts, minutes of PLC meetings and questionnaires.

Step 2 initial noting involved transcribing and formatting interviews were into a 2-column Word document. After reading and re-reading the interviews some exploratory comments were recorded in the second column.

A sample of this work is in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
<th>Exploratory comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think the thing that has benefited me the most is focusing on researching about</td>
<td>Life-long learning emerging here as a desire to keep learning. Modeling learning to our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different strategies and teaching methods. I know that's one thing that is always on</td>
<td>students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my list to keep up with best practices but always gets dropped because I'm focusing</td>
<td>Time seems to keep coming up. Like teachers do not have time for everything they have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the here and the now. So I think the PLCs really make me do it. It is good that I</td>
<td>to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get to keep up on my reading. Also I think just working with colleagues, communicating,</td>
<td>The PLCs provide an opportunity for colleagues to communicate and collaborate. Again he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just having that resource to just share with people but mainly the most beneficial</td>
<td>is talking about the sharing of resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thing is helping me keep in touch with research. As teaches you always need to know</td>
<td>What is best – for who? Teachers, students the school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what's new and what's the best.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Interview comments/recordings
Step 3 involved developing emergent themes through analysis to the next level. In order to do this all the transcribed interviews were laid out on a table along with the anonymous questionnaires and the primary researcher’s diary. A number of themes were identified as the same comments kept coming through the interviews and during the reading and re-reading stage.

Step 4 involved searching for connections across emergent themes and employed the use of two methods: abstraction and numeration (Smith et al., 2009). Firstly the process of abstraction highlighted patterns between emergent themes and developed a sense of what is called a ‘super-ordinate’ theme. This was done by putting like-with-like themes and coming up with a new title for the theme. The new themes were then known as super-ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). Next numeration was used to identify the frequency with which each theme was supported.

Step 5 moving to the next case involved repeating steps 1-4 on the next transcript.

Step 6 involved looking for patterns across cases and once again involved identifying all the places where themes were already identified. This data was then put in table form for the analysis section of the report.

Table 4 contains the super-ordinate themes that emerged throughout the analysis process. The first column is a list of the themes. The second column shows where and how often they occurred. I stands for interview, AQ for anonymous questionnaire and R1 is the researcher’s diary. The third column contains key words which identified the theme.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing resources</td>
<td>25AQ, 4I, 3R1.</td>
<td>Share culture, sharing resources, what teachers were doing in their classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life-long learning</td>
<td>10AQ, 4I, 2R1.</td>
<td>Research, next steps, research papers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear action research</td>
<td>8AQ, 6I, 3R1.</td>
<td>Focus, start earlier, too short, unsuitable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>7AQ, 2I, 2R1.</td>
<td>Model, participatory leadership, good team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>8AQ, 2I, 1R1</td>
<td>Sharing, relaxed, trust, collaboration, first year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>6AQ, 2I.</td>
<td>Guide, on-topic, agenda, focused, oversight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>2AQ, 6I, 2R1.</td>
<td>Timetable, tired, every week, worthwhile, planning period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>4AQ, 2I.</td>
<td>Needs analysis, staff strengths, accountable, exit goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
<td>6AQ, 3I</td>
<td>New staff, first year, supportive, sharing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Table of super-ordinate themes

OUTCOMES

It became apparent that the open sharing of resources within the PLCs was something the teaching staff greatly appreciated. PLC participants showed evidence of considerable willingness to share with their peers and reflect upon their sharing experiences. They also displayed a mutual appreciation for the work of colleagues and knowing what was going on in other classrooms.

When asked what the most beneficial aspect of the PLCs was, Teacher 4.2 answered:

*The sharing of resources because especially being my first year here and there are not a lot of resources, just people who have been here a while and have experience. Even like worksheets and just anything, ideas what to do with certain things. Also just*
comparing work as well with grading. It helps to have other people’s point of view with the writing and things like that.

For Teacher 4.2 who was at the school for her first year, sharing of resources within the PLCs was the most important aspect. This extract also reveals the importance of belonging to a community especially for new teachers.

Teacher 4.1 who had been teaching for more than ten years and at the present project school for two years echoed Teacher 4.2’s sentiments.

Teacher 4.1 said:

Hearing what other people are doing in their classrooms cause it’s eh so hard when you’re a teacher in a classroom to get a take on what’s actually happening in other classrooms. Just that kind of support, it helps when you’re doing things in eh and that you have other people who are doing the same thing and having some of the struggles as you. Even if you cannot fix the problems it’s always nice to, misery loves company.

The above record shows the kind of camaraderie that was built through the PLCs. Teacher 4.1 alludes to the loneliness or isolation that teachers feel when a culture of sharing is not promoted in a school. R1 also felt the PLCs provided an avenue for resources to be shared that was not there previously.

Prior to the creation of the PLCs in 2012 there was a feeling of isolation among teachers. It was kind of as long as my class is going well I don’t care about the others. I actually had this kind of feeling myself, kind of like look out for number one, however, as time went by and I was responsible for the year three to five classes as Head of Studies an ownership for the upper half of the school as put upon me. I now see that
this kind of ownership for every student in the whole school needs to be felt by all teachers. Like we are all in this together.

Teacher 3.3 had been with the school for a long period of time, though at another campus and had seen huge changes in that time. Her comment below shows her delight in being able to ask questions of staff who have been at the school for a longer period of time. The PLCs were for her a replacement to an induction session that she never had as she joined the school mid-year to replace another teacher.

I think also because you get a lot of new staff in. I've been quite lucky in this year level because 3.1 and 3.2 have been here for a long time. You've been here for a long time so whenever I've had some queries I've also felt I've been able to ask but I think in some other year levels where teachers are quite new nobody wants to really ask or nobody knows what advice to give to a person.

A strong desire for upgrading and professional learning among the teachers began to emerge early on in the data analysis process. It became evident that the teachers saw the PLCs as an effective way for professional development to take place. They felt that there was a need and an opportunity to constantly learn new strategies and keep abreast of current pedagogical issues.

Teacher 3.3 identified a kind of revelation while alluding to the fact that with an already heavy workload she was at risk of becoming complacent.

I think you should have the focus because otherwise you can become complacent in your class if you’re not thinking: What can I be doing this week [ ] when you have something to focus on it makes you do it. If you say, put this into class but not talk about it, not focus on it, you will not really do it. Because of time constraints or [ ] you
look at it, you do some research on it, you do it, then you see the benefits of doing it. I think when you start doing it becomes very natural.

What Teacher 3.3 meant by “become complacent” is that she could easily get into a routine teaching her class but forget to set time aside to learn for herself. With family commitments, teaching, after school activities and so many other activities that require our attention, there is scant time left for professional learning. For her, this time was available during PLCs.

The research shows a pattern of how teachers appreciated the learning and ongoing professional development that took place in PLCs.

CULTURE

An enormous amount of research has been carried out into the area of organisational culture (Nankervis, 2008; Ogbonna & Harris, 1998; Schein, 2000; Senge, 1992). Below are some extracts taken form the questionnaires that show the sense of value teachers took from the PLCs.

First extract:

My role was the same as my colleagues. I feel that I was a valued member in the PLC meetings, who researched, put into practice and evaluated new ideas/classroom practices. I think I contributed effectively and shared ideas. I also listened to others and took advice from them and their research to improve myself.

Second extract:
The way the groups were run, I definitely felt like a contributing and equal member of a team, whose ideas and work was valued. I felt good in doing research in knowing that my input and work would be valued as a contributor to the meeting.

Third extract:

The impacts (of the PLCs) have been far reaching and many times more productive than a meeting. In the future as a department head of head teacher a PLC or small groups of PLCs would be the way to move forward [] my role was only to speak freely and offer suggestions according to my background and experience. On some topics you could sense an immediate change in the group and you would realise, ‘Hey, I’m the expert in this area I guess, let’s take the lead.’ And other times you might take a step back and be the learner.

These three extracts identify some important experiences the teachers had in relation to the PLCs. A key word in two extracts is ‘valued’. The teachers felt valued by adding to the corporate knowledge while in the PLC. They enjoyed sharing their expertise with each other and this gave them a sense of belonging. Unfortunately there are many pressures on the teachers from the school and from living in a new country. All this pressure often takes its toll but the PLCs were a place where participants were professionally as well as socially valued. This in turn has to make an impact on the entire school culture.

Another interesting statement was made in the third extract. The teacher said that impacts of the PLCs had been many times more productive “than a meeting”. This quote shows how the teacher saw a staff meeting as being something that is not productive whereas he saw the PLC as not being a staff meeting but a different form of gathering that generated productive dialogue and authentic professional communication.
CONCLUSION

Some emerging themes underpinning PLCs are simple yet important in an international school, like helping teachers to settle into a new cultural setting. The present research found that when new teachers move from their home country to Vietnam, the PLCs provide a support network where they can ask questions in a small group and cover things like where to buy bed sheets or where is a good place to live. All of these little aspects of life add to teacher contentment and, in turn, add to a positive school culture. PLCs can also offer benefits as an ongoing induction program clarifying and accommodating international school contexts and requirements. Furthermore and most importantly, PLCs offer teachers the opportunity for professional dialogue and support which in turn supports their opportunities to grow and mature professionally. Such development helps to carry the workplace forward as a productive learning organization. If teachers are more confident in what they are doing and feel positively supported in their roles, they will perform better as teachers and school colleagues. Such outcomes benefit the entire school community and generate a more positive culture of learning.

REFERENCES


