

Professional learning communities enhancing teacher experiences in international schools

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ABSTRACT: *In international school contexts, schools that establish support networks for newly arrived staff tend to stand a better chance of retaining staff and creating a positive and successful work environment. The case study at the center of the paper is an International School in Vietnam and this paper aims to highlight the importance of building professional learning communities (PLCs), both as arenas for academic expertise to be shared and as support networks for teachers. The PLCs being researched were established in August 2011, with the research taking place over 6 weeks during April and May of 2013. Eleven teachers took part in the phenomenological case study undertaken to gain a better understanding of their lived experiences. Findings suggest there was a refocusing on student achievement as being central to teachers' core business; an understanding of the importance of teacher leadership developed; teachers felt more valued because personal professionalism was acknowledged; and, a culture of sharing collaboration and general support emerged.*

KEYWORDS: professional learning communities, teachers' lived experience, teacher leadership, international schooling

CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESEARCH

I am a grade five teacher and curriculum coordinator for grades three to five at the case study school and am both researcher and participant. The idiographic reflective relationship that resulted from my dual role gave rise to what I will refer to as the 'reflective I.' I collated a reflective journal throughout the research process and extracts from this journal appear in textboxes throughout this paper. The second author was an advisor and guide who provided insights and guidance throughout the research and writing processes.

My school is a bilingual international primary school and students study the Singaporean national curriculum for half of the day. During the other half of the day, they study the Vietnamese National Curriculum. There are 500 students in the school, 95 percent of which are Vietnamese nationals. That percentage is unique to the school site as its sister school in another area of the city has a 50 percent Vietnamese student population. The multinational element is not as strong in this school context as compared to most International Schools.

The school exhibits seven of the eight criteria listed by the International Association of School Leadership (2009) as being representative of an international school and is currently under accreditation through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (2012). If the school

receives international accreditation it will have all eight criteria:

- Transferability of the student's education across international schools.
- A moving population (higher than in state schools or public schools).
- Multinational and multilingual student body.
- An international curriculum (e.g., International Baccalaureate; Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education; Global Assessment Certificate).
- International accreditation (e.g., Council of International Schools; International Baccalaureate Organization; Western Association of Schools and Colleges).
- A transient and multinational teacher population.
- Non-selective student enrollment.
- Usually English or a bilingual language used for instruction (Skirrow, 2009).

As part of the accreditation process home groups have been established. This is the most basic form of professional learning community, a place where teachers can come together to share resources and strategies to improve student outcomes. These groups are usually created as grade level or same-subject groups and in this context have been utilized to help institutionalize the work of the professional learning communities (PLCs).

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Whilst undertaking professional development and study, I identified a need in my school for shared professional learning. There were many talented teachers in the school who displayed personal mastery (Senge, 1992) in their particular subject areas. This knowledge needed to be accessed and shared. With the support of my principal and after discussion with colleagues, three PLCs were set up in August 2011, one for each grade level supervised. During the first academic year of the PLCs, the meetings took place during lunchtime or after school hours. After further reading about PLCs and, in particular the work of Kruse, Seashore Louis, and Bryk (1994), I learned that PLCs work more effectively when they are timetabled, prioritized by school administration and after being negotiated with all stakeholders involved.

With this in mind in, August 2012, the PLCs were timetabled for the first time. This immediately brought forth results as teachers attended more regularly and stayed for longer periods of time. This practice has become institutionalized and the PLCs are currently timetabled for one period of 45 minutes per week. They take place while the students are out of the classroom attending one of the specialist subjects such as Music, Health and Physical Education or Information and Communication Technology.

As the initial PLCs started to mature it was agreed that teachers would undertake action research projects to focus attention on identified aspects of their teaching practice, e.g., guided reading; mental computations in mathematics. Leaders and teachers felt that this would add depth to our professional conversations and build a reflective and supportive culture, which in turn would improve student outcomes.

THE LITERATURE

The literature on PLCs is extensive and this paper makes no attempt to summarize or even refer to all the most prominent researchers in this field. However, three key areas related to this paper are addressed: PLCs; life-long learning and reflective practice; and PLCs from initiation to institutionalization. Each is then framed within the international school context.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

For 21st century schools to become communities of learners, where teacher-learners and student-learners become innovative, reflective thinkers capable of ‘dancing on the shifting carpet’ (Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010), teachers need processes and structures allowing generative (double-loop) learning rather than adaptive (single-loop) learning to take place. This requires a fundamentally different way of working ‘with teachers becoming collaborative creators and implementers of contextualized professional knowledge’ (Lewis, 2003, p. 264).

Research that focuses on what effective learning communities look like shows that they are centered around specific contexts and workplaces, unlike communities of practice, which tend to be established across contexts (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Mitchell and Sackney (2011, p. 18) believe ‘people are autonomous, rational individuals (the liberal view) and that they are fundamentally social in nature, responsible for the well-being of others, and interested in the overall health of their social or organizational context (the communitarian view).’ The professional learning community brings these two tensions together creating an environment that celebrates individual learning and thrives on collaborative practice. Teachers learn from one another and exchange ideas for the overall improvement of classes, schools, and most importantly outcomes for students (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007).

The benefits of learning communities are multifaceted in nature encompassing collegial support and stronger professional connections, as well as increased levels of teacher job satisfaction and commitment (Hord, 2003). These benefits are due largely to the fact that the individuals within a professional learning community usually share norms and values, utilize reflective dialog and are prepared to share practices and work collaboratively for the good of the collective (Bolam et al., 2005; Seashore Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996).

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within the context of a cohesive group, that focuses on collective knowledge and that exists 'within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders' (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007, p. 3). Originally the thinking behind the creation of learning communities was focused solely on improving teaching and learning outcomes for students, however, the necessity of creating a culture of care and strong relationships is now included in the parameters of what a professional learning community encompasses (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007).

In an international school context, where changing personnel are a constant reality, creating a culture of professionalism, care and belonging is central to teachers feeling supported and a part of a wider purpose and direction. This research suggests that when prioritized and supported by leadership and teacher commitment, PLCs can be invaluable avenues of support and connection both personally and professionally.

LIFE-LONG LEARNING AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

ED4 Key characteristics of the international teaching profession are: Global citizens, digital citizenship, professional learning, reflective practice, life-long learning and problem solving. According to Friend and Cook (2007), reflective practice and life-long learning are two essential aspects of collaboration. When teachers are learners themselves, and not reliant on administration or school leaders to determine what quality teaching and learning is about, then they are able to pass their knowledge and passion for quality learning on to their students. Life-long learning and reflective practice are essential aspects of the teaching profession (McKernan & McKernan, 2013). PLCs provide a space for teachers to come together, reflect, and learn from one another. Reflective practice is a fundamental part of the day-to-day activities of a teacher (Beveridge, Fruchter, Sanmartin, & deLottinville, 2014). It is something most teachers do naturally at the end of every lesson or unit of work and the process of collective reflective practice should become a part of daily practice in all schools (Dewar, Servos, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2013).

The focus in a PLC is to enact changes in order to improve conditions and outcomes for

the whole school community, thus reflecting 'in' and 'on' action becomes a priority (Hord, 2003). Schön (1987) speaks of 'action' learning communities possessing the following characteristics: Bias for reflection-in-action; formation of learning alliances; development of external networks; multiple reward systems; creation of meaningful information; individual empowerment; and leadership and vision.

While all people have the capacity to learn, the structures in which they have to function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement. Furthermore, people may lack the tools and guiding ideas to make sense of the situations they face (Argyris, 1993). Pedagogical practice in schools must change to meet the needs of our students today but 'when teachers are isolated from one another, few will be willing to take the risks and endure the failures that professional transformation requires' (Palmer, 2007, p. 23). It is therefore important for teachers to come together to examine the variables and subject them to further scrutiny. Double-loop learning is reflection and action followed by further reflection which can take place individually or collectively (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Friend & Cook, 2007; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). Formalized PLCs provide a structured avenue for reflection.

There is broad international consensus that 'a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, and operating as a collective enterprise' creates PLCs capable of improving learning and teaching practice (Stoll et al., 2006).

FROM INITIATION TO INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The term 'professional learning community' suggests that focus is not just on individual teacher learning but on: (1) professional learning, (2) within the context of a cohesive group, (3) that focuses on collective knowledge, and (4) occurs within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the lives of teachers, students and school leaders (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). However, it takes time for true institutionalization to occur. Fullan (1985) explored what he saw as three phases of change (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: THREE PHASES OF CHANGE

Initiation	Staff adopt an innovation by making the decision to proceed with the change
Implementation	Staff begin to operationalize the innovation into practice
Institutionalization	The innovation is recognized as an ongoing part of the system or the 'way things are done around here'

After Fullan (1985).

In the change process the formation of home groups may help international school learning communities to move from the initiation phase to the institutionalization phase. However, it is a process that takes time, and the timeframe is considered to be longer for secondary schools than for primary schools due to their diverse curricula and more diverse imperatives (Kruse, Seashore Louis, & Bryk, 1994).

Within mature PLCs, the task of improving learning among students, teachers and school leaders becomes the norm or 'how things are done around here.' When professional learning becomes the norm, teachers do not feel threatened by having their work critiqued or fear entering into a learning relationship with others (DuFour, 2004). At this point, the PLCs at the school site are in the implementation phase and reliance on the Head of Studies to organize and run meetings is still the norm. As the PLCs move forward it is anticipated that teacher leadership development will see a reduction in the reliance on a leader and instead shared responsibility for the running and intent of sessions will be shared across group members. It is at this point that institutionalization will have commenced (Fullan, 1985).

METHODOLOGY

The research method chosen for this project is the Phenomenological Case Study, which is not easily summarized as a single form of educational or social research but rather as an 'approach' to research which has been fed by many different theoretical tributaries (Somekh & Lewin, 2012). One aspect common to all phenomenological approaches is the emphasis on study-in-depth and

the capturing of the lived experience of the participants in relation to a particular phenomenon.

The researcher may produce an account of the case based phenomenon from the outside as an observer and interpreter of others' lived experiences, or from the inside as a co-participant as is the case in this study. In case studies the intent is to understand and interpret information so as to determine dynamics, processes and implications that often lead to further research (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2010). Various means of data collection may be used, with themed interviews being the most common. Cases are usually studied within their own special environment. The phenomenon under investigation in this study was the establishment of PLCs in an International school in Vietnam.

Phenomenology embodies the essence of qualitative research as 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Founding phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Schutz made invaluable contributions to the validation of practice within interpretative research and highlighted the main concept of phenomenology as a means of seeking understanding about how we experience the world and how we construct meaning out of that experience (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenology can be said to be inter-subjective in nature as our experiences are filtered with, and through the eyes of, others and 'whatever meaning we create has its roots in human actions, and the totality of social artifacts and cultural objects is grounded in human activity' (Wilson, 2002, p. 1).

By focusing on the lived experience of the participants, phenomenology allows a particularly reflective participant researcher stance to unfold (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology asks what the experience for the participants is like in detail and what sense a particular person is making of what is happening to them. Studies usually have a small number of participants and the aim is to reveal something of the experience of each of those individuals. Within the phenomenological case study it is the case that is emphasized but individual voices are heard.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

For this research project, the lived experiences of teachers from the three differing PLCs were explored. I was also a participant and my ‘lived experience’ was a part of the story needing to be told. This gave rise to the selection of phenomenological case study as the research method and enabled me to utilize my personal reflections and interpretations as a source of data. Extracts from my reflective journal offer insights into my own lived experiences throughout the research journey.

The overarching question was *What have been the outcomes of establishing structured professional learning communities within an international school context in Vietnam?* In order to explore what this meant for the participants in this study a further three questions underpinned this study: (1) *What were the lived experiences of teachers working in the professional learning communities?* (2) *What has been the relationship between action research and the building of the professional learning communities?* and (3) *What implications arise from this study?*

Research about the PLCs was conducted in two phases: The first one being a questionnaire which detailed initial perceptions by all PLC members regarding the value of the PLCs; and, the second being the phenomenological case study about which this article is written. Participants in this later phase had identified themselves as wishing to be involved in the case study research when answering the general questionnaire. A semi-structured interview approach was taken because it allowed participants to speak freely about his or her experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The stories of lived experiences added depth and breadth to themes that had been only touched on in the earlier questionnaire. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for textual interpretation.

DATA GATHERING

In this article extracts from participant transcripts are identified by pseudonyms. The reflective journal extracts are all taken from my research diary and are placed within text boxes throughout.

According to Somekh and Lewin (2012), reflective journals are nearly always used in concert with other forms of documentation and data collection, most notably interviews, observations and

artifacts. Reflective journals are particularly useful for offering possible insights into phenomena that were not obvious or predictable when the research journey began. In this research project, the reflective journal helped me to capture the particular context of each professional learning community. Details such as how participants were acting that day, whether they were feeling tired or energetic, what their body language was like and a number of other contextual features added insights which allowed for greater clarity when interpreting interview responses. The reflective journal allowed my own lived experience of working, leading and researching the PLCs to be captured.

As can be seen in Table 2 participants came to the study with a wide range of teaching experience. The majority were teachers working and traveling at the same time and generally without

TABLE 2: PARTICIPANT LIST WITHIN THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

Participant code	Description
Daniel	Male teacher with about 10 years’ experience, seventh year at the school
Jimmy	Teacher with <5 years’ experience, second year at the school
Sinead	Female teacher recently graduated from teacher college, first year at the school
Danny	Male teacher with >10 years’ experience, second year at the school
Jose	Female teacher with <5 years’ experience, second year at the school
Maura	Female teacher with >10 years’ experience, fifth year at the school
Amy	Female teacher recently graduated from teacher college, first year at the school
Nigel	Male teacher with <5 years’ experience, first year at the school
Chrystal	Female teacher with <5 years’ experience, first year at the school
Raymond	Male teacher with >10 years’ experience, first year at the school
R1	Male teacher with <10 years’ experience, eighth year at the school

any intention to remain in the school for longer than a couple of years, as is often the case within the international school context (Odland & Ruzicka, 2009), whilst others had made Vietnam their home for some time.

SHARING THE DATA

Transcripts were searched for themes pertinent to what the majority of teachers shared in the semi-structured interviews. Initially themes around the day-to-day practices that enhanced teachers working lives became apparent. Teachers valued the space that the PLCs provided to:

- Share resources and pedagogical practices (Theme 1).
- Provide and receive social and emotional support (Theme 2).
- Give focus to professional learning (Theme 3).
- The role played by the action research projects (Theme 4).

Exploring the lived experiences as a whole allowed for an even deeper understanding to develop. Participation in the PLCs on the whole provided staff with:

- A renewed energy and commitment to students as individuals (Shared experience 1).
- Feelings of being valued and shared ownership of purpose (Shared experience 2).
- The opportunity to lead and contribute to the learning of others (Shared experience 3).
- An empowering professional experience (Shared experience 4).

Meeting times became valuable ongoing induction opportunities not only to the school but also to the community and culture, feelings of isolation diminished while understand of supervision and leadership emerged in a different light. The supervisory element that many perceived as part of meeting agendas (rightly or wrongly) was not seen as threatening due largely to the no blame environment that was created over time.

Theme 1 – sharing resources and pedagogical approaches

The sharing of resources was appreciated by all staff and most particularly by those new to the school:

The sharing of resources was great because, especially being my first year here. 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 ... (Daniel 20.5.2013)

Pedagogical sharing was also appreciated with long-term staff commenting on the opening up of practice that occurred within the PLCs, particularly around the various action research projects being undertaken:

Students get the benefit of different ideas in the classroom, which may not have been available to them otherwise! Different ways of working help different kids. (Maura 15.5.2013)

Jose echoed this sentiment adding that the *'PLCs helped me to improve my professional practice through learning new ways of doing things.'* Interestingly Jose was a teacher who had at first been reluctant to commit time to the PLCs. A renewed energy and commitment to improving practices in order to improve student outcomes appeared to have emerged.

Theme 2 – social and emotional support

Sinead came into the case study school from another campus where she had been teaching for a long time. Even with this past experience she felt new to the context and felt that *'whenever I've had some queries ... 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.'* The tone of Sinead's voice implied the importance of the PLC for this teacher and she felt safe to dip into the tacit knowledge of her peers. This kind of support network allowed intellectual capacity and social and emotional support to be built between teachers, which in turn strengthened the school system. Jimmy had been teaching for 10 years and for two within this international school context and yet echoed much of what Daniel shared above:

Hearing what other people are doing in their classrooms is great – 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 ... and you learn other people are doing the same thing and having some of the same struggles. Even if you cannot fix the problems it's always nice to share, misery loves company. (Jimmy 20.5.2013)

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Prior to the creation of the professional learning communities in 2012, there was a feeling of isolation among teachers. There was a sense of, 'As long as my class is going well, I don't care about the others.' I actually had this kind of mentality myself, a kind of like 'Look out for number one' mindset. However, as time went by and I became responsible for the grade three to five classes as Head of Studies, an ownership for the upper half of the school was suddenly upon me. I now see that this kind of ownership for every student in the whole school needs to be felt by all teachers. We are all in this together. (R1 3.5.2013)

Theme 3 – focused professional learning

The sharing of resources and the teachers' desire to have new and effective teaching strategies in their classrooms leads to the next super-ordinate theme of focused professional learning or life-long learning. This took place individually and collectively. Sinead identifies a kind of positive inner struggle experienced when focusing on a particular aspect of her practice:

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. (Sinead 23.5.2013)

She went on to speak of the benefit of using action research to give focus to collegial sharing, yet alludes to the fact that with an already heavy workload she can 'become complacent.' She admits to finding it easy to get into a routine teaching her class and forget to set time aside to learn and asks the question that many ask of themselves 'With teaching, after school activities, family commitments and so many other undertakings that require our attention, where is the time for professional learning?' I interpreted this to mean that for her, the professional learning community sessions

disrupted this complacency and challenged her priorities whilst also allowing her the time to reflect deeply on her practice.

Theme 4 – the role played by action research

The use of the word 'focus' came up regularly in our interview sessions in relation to the action research projects and were seen as a way of critically evaluating personal as well as school-wide or year level-wide practices. Some used the word to describe how the action research projects gave each meeting a focus. During the action research we had been focusing on one thing at a time, it might be reading. We would then delve into the research and practice to figure out how we could improve our student's reading. This would be in contrast to other meetings where a number of different topics would be touched upon. It was the depth of shared understandings that ensued which was most appreciated:

I would describe it (action research) as a positive experience. It enabled me to share ideas and look closer at my teaching practice. I was also able to learn from others to hear what had or hadn't worked for them. Having a focus every week enabled me to keep focused on my professional development and to continually update and improve myself. (Danny 22.5.2013)

The action research process in the PLCs gave them more direction. Teachers seemed to enjoy the focus topics because they were all aimed at improving student results or pedagogical practice.

Shared experience 1 – renewed focus on students

The first of the shared lived experience themes flows out of the emphasis placed on the value of focused learning and how the reflective nature of action research and collaboration within a professional learning community honed in on students, their results and their individual learning journeys. 'Students get the benefit of different ideas in the classroom' (Maura); 'We focus more on results and engaging students through using different strategies' (Chrystal); and, 'We compiled data on our students' successes and challenges, then discussed ways to capitalize on the successes and overcome the challenges' (Daniel):

It amazed me throughout the past two years how the teachers gradually got more and more into the learning. Initially, and I mean two years ago, when we started the PLCs, a number of the teachers saw them as a waste of time. Then, as time went by, I noticed they would start to bring things to share and take more ownership of the meetings. One day, when I lost track of time and forgot about a PLC meeting time, there was a knock on my office door and an angry looking teacher was telling me to get a move on, that we had some important planning for the students, for next year. I noticed throughout the study that the better teachers always put about the students first and this consistently came through in their language. (R1 20.5.2013)

As educators, many of us enter the profession in the hope of making a difference in students' lives, however, it is easy to lose sight of this in light of the many demands on our time. Curriculum deadlines must be met, parent issues must be sorted, testing regimes must be adhered to and external accountability measures often dominate thinking. Having the time to truly focus on student learning was invaluable.

Shared experience 2 – building teacher leadership capacity

Interestingly an underpinning thread that emerged was that of how the concept of supervision, which teachers associated with leadership, was seen with fresh eyes. In my role I modeled the leading of discussions and the guiding of the action research process and thus influenced the way in which teachers perceived both my role and theirs within the school:

The PLC facilitator was focused and supportive. He also modeled participatory leadership, by sharing his own ideas, methods and technical knowledge. His dedication to the program was a motivating factor for me and led me to improve my own professional learning, especially in the area of research and technology. (Sinead 23.5.2013)

In so doing I also developed an added sense of the value of the professional learning community enhancing my supervisory role. I found the collaborative discussions and sharing of practice to be an excellent means of obtaining valuable insights into teacher work, which was beneficial for staff and leaders.

A number of references to the leadership of these professional community sessions reinforced the positive role that I appear to have played in teacher perceptions. When speaking of the role I played teachers responded in various affirmative ways '*a positive impact*' (Daniel); '*a guiding force and facilitator*' (Jimmy); '*checks with teachers to see how their research and application is going*' (Sinead); '*he listens – he asks the group what they want to research*' (Jose); '*he's supportive*' (Maura). Danny articulated my role in the following way:

The PLC leader has helped to give ideas, guide the group in the weekly meetings. He has helped to move our experiences forward and be able to help us improve practice in the classroom. He has helped to keep the discussions focused and facilitated us in sharing ideas. (Danny 22.5.2013)

Jose indicated with these words, '*yesterday was not a formal meeting without you [I] being there ...*' the reliance on me that had developed to facilitate the discussion within her group. In turn this empowered me to try harder to live up to expectations but also caused me to reflect on the nature of my involvement and identify the need for further development of teacher leaders in the PLCs so they are not reliant on my presence. Without teacher ownership of outcomes sustainability of the PLCs will be problematic:

Although I have tried a number of strategies in order to build teacher leadership in the grade three and grade four PLC, it does not seem to be working. The grade five group, on the other hand, works very well together and are very serious about education. However, I am a grade five teacher and always attend these meetings, so it may be me steering this one too. Serious effort needs to be made into the area of teacher leadership. Otherwise, if I leave the school, all this work may have been a waste of time and will not last. (R1 2.5.2013)

While analyzing the data and identifying the themes, the need for teacher leadership emerged as a prominent one. Another related theme to leadership is the area of supervision. It began to emerge that multiple stakeholders in the PLCs, including the teachers and R1, had identified a kind of supervision taking place in the PLCs. This shall be examined in the next section.

Shared experience 3 – professionalism is seen to be valued

The professional learning community sessions allowed me to sit back and listen enabling a far greater understanding of the successes and challenges facing teachers. This in turn allowed for the targeting of research direction and planning for professional development needs, including efforts to build teacher leadership capacity. Teachers felt valued for their contributions and the way in which initial feedback from staff led to the timetabling of the professional learning sessions as a part of regular school practice.

In the past professional development was traditionally after school hours or on Saturdays at the school site. This was not satisfactory and teachers wanted to be out of there as soon as possible. At the beginning of the school year (2012–2013), the principal embedded the PLC time into the timetable. This valuing of teachers personal time by timetabling sessions into the normal school day had significant impact both in changes of attitude and levels of commitment by staff. Interestingly a repeated theme was that teachers valued these times as an opportunity for what they described as ‘supervision’ to take place because *‘the tone of the professional learning communities was supportive and celebrated teachers’ successes’* (Danny). Sinead commented that one of the strengths of these meetings was that *‘we are praised in public even if private follow up is needed.’*

Shared experience 4 – empowering the teacher

Findings showed clearly that ‘success breeds success’ (Crowther, 2011) and teachers therefore felt empowered to contribute in ways that they had not done prior to the establishment of the PLCs:

My role was the same as my colleague’s. 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. (Jose 15.5.2013)

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. (Sinead 23.5.2013)

The impacts have been far reaching and many times more productive than a meeting. In the future, as a department head or head teacher, 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 teachers would realize, ‘Hey, I’m the expert in this area, I guess, let’s take the lead.’ And other times they might take a step back and be the learner in much the same way that I did. (Jimmy 17.5.2013)

As facilitator of the professional learning meetings I noted how teachers were prepared to contribute their expertise as well as listen and learn from others in a truly collaborative fashion. A particularly interesting statement is made in the third extract where the teacher says that impacts of the PLCs have been many times more productive *‘than a meeting.’* This quote helped me see how the teacher sees a meeting as being something that is not productive but PLC time was considered to be different. This quote shows how the particular teacher enjoys the professional learning community time and sees them as both worthwhile and productive.

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

Certainly the majority of the findings were positive but as is always the case there are challenges yet to overcome. One of the major drawbacks to the current professional learning community structure is the fact that all Vietnamese co-teachers are required to attend the specialist lesson with the students. He or she can therefore not attend the professional learning community meetings, which is a disadvantage in terms of planning, communication sustainability and capacity building (Ridley, 2011; Senge, 1992). This is an area in need of further thought and rescheduling.

Throughout the project, I facilitated the majority of the professional learning community meetings. I recorded minutes of meetings and set the agendas. It was my responsibility to keep the PLCs on topic and help participants to come to a consensus during differences of opinion. Building

capacity in others to lead (Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009; Silins & Mulford, 2004) is another area in need of further thought and development.

Some teachers were confused by the Action Research focus and wished for more guidance:

We should have all focused on a single method or methodology or topic and we should have all agreed this is what we are going to work on, then we should have gone back to the classroom and tried it out and reported on it and that we did not do. (Maura 15.5.2013)

In this extract the teacher uses the word 'should' three times. This shows her frustration with the process. Another aspect that led to frustration was that the teachers' research came from their personal beliefs about quality learning and teaching and did not rely enough upon authoritative pedagogies:

Little understanding (of the action research process) at first, but, as we got together, it became more clear. In most cases, we were not sharing professional readings but research on students' achievements as we compiled data on our students' successes and challenges, then discussed ways to capitalize on the successes and overcome the challenges. (Daniel 20.5.2013)

The ones (research findings from an action research cycle) we did so far were similar, except most of us didn't 'research' and merely reeled of what we are doing already. I can see how it would have merit though if we did more background reading and research. (Danny 22.5.2013)

Although this can be thought of as a challenge, the acknowledgment and reflection on personal deficits regarding the action research process is in itself significant. Teachers obviously felt comfortable enough to share that they had limited understandings of expectations and therefore identified how they might be able to improve. Of even more significance is that these admissions indicate that a 'no blame' (Crowther, 2011) environment had been clearly established within the PLCs. Teachers were not embarrassed or ashamed to indicate that they could improve their practice.

IMPLICATIONS

Certainly much of the prior research conducted into the benefits of establishing PLCs were confirmed by this research. The benefits of sharing resources and pedagogical practices, in school timetabling for ongoing learning opportunities, and the social and

emotional benefits for teachers, particularly those new to a school, were central to these findings. In an International School context, the professional learning groups gained an added dimension as they allowed teachers to gain valuable understandings of both country and culture playing a significant ongoing induction and orientation role.

What became apparent was a re-positioning of the individual student at the center of the teachers' core business; an understanding of the importance of developing teacher leadership capacity; a sense that teachers felt more valued and their professionalism was being acknowledged by those in a leadership position. This 'valuing' saw the emergence of shared commitment by teachers and a sense of purpose that had been missing when staff felt isolated from one another. Most significant of all was that challenges were raised and discussed openly as part of a culture of collaborative individualism that had previously been absent. This change in culture took time to achieve and will need nurturing to continue.

The change in culture can be seen as the essence of these combined lived experiences. A culture of reflective interrogation of practice and the collegial sharing of outcomes had become both accepted and welcomed. Fundamental to this acceptance, and indeed eagerness for the professional learning community structure to continue was that a 'no blame' culture been actively nurtured and established the result being that teachers felt empowered to share and learn together in ways previously not experienced.

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ED6

Queries

- ED1 Please add 'Association of School Leadership, 2009' to the reference list.
- ED2 Please check the inclusion of running title 'Professional learning communities enhancing teacher experiences' is fine.
- ED3 Please add 'Seashore Louis et al., 1996' to the reference list.
- ED4 Please add 'Friend and Cook, 2007' to the reference list.
- ED5 We have changed the 'boxed text' as 'extract' throughout the article. Please confirm if this is fine.
- ED6 Please provide received and accepted dates.