

Teacher Leadership and Collaborative Practice: Strategies for Fostering Professional Learning Communities in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been widely recognized as a strategic approach to improving the quality of education through continuous collaboration between educators. This article explores the critical role of teacher leadership and collaborative practices in forming and sustaining effective PLCs in school settings. Based on conceptual frameworks and empirical findings, the discussion focused on how teachers can act as agents of change through their informal and formal influence, as well as strategies for building a productive collaborative culture. The article also highlights some of the challenges in PLC implementation, such as time constraints, resistance to change, and lack of institutional support. Through case studies and literature reviews, it has been shown that integration between teacher leadership and collaborative practice can improve collective efficacy, instructional coherence, and student learning outcomes. In conclusion, the establishment of a successful PLC requires structural support, ongoing professional development, as well as a school environment that supports collective learning and equitably distributed leadership.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the face of the demands of 21st-century education reform, schools are required not only to be places to transfer knowledge, but also to be collaborative spaces that encourage innovation and continuous learning. One of the approaches that has been widely developed in this context is the formation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLC is a collective approach in which teachers and school leaders work collaboratively to improve the learning process and student learning outcomes through reflection, dialogue, and data-driven action (DuFour, 2004). The role of teachers as leaders and collaborators is a key element in the successful implementation of PLC in the school environment.

Teacher leadership in PLC is not always tied to formal structural positions, but rather to influences born of competence, commitment, and interpersonal relationships. Teachers as instructional leaders play an important role in building a shared vision, encouraging critical reflection, and encouraging colleagues to take collective responsibility for student learning (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). According to Harris and Muijs (2005), effective teacher leadership is able to create a professional culture that supports collective learning and innovation. This is supported by studies showing that schools with high levels of teacher leadership tend to have a collaborative work climate and better student learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2007).

Collaborative practices are at the core of an effective PLC. Through regular meetings, teachers can share experiences, analyze learning outcome data, design learning strategies together, and conduct peer observations in a structured manner. This kind of collaboration

not only enriches teaching practices, but also builds a sense of belonging to the changes made. As stated by Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008), teacher involvement in collective reflective dialogue has been shown to improve instructional quality in the classroom. Collaboration also strengthens the collective efficacy of teachers, i.e. the belief that joint efforts can bring positive impacts to students (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004).

Nevertheless, the implementation of PLC is not separated from challenges. In many schools, time constraints are a major obstacle. Teachers have a high workload, making it difficult to make time for meaningful collaboration. In addition, resistance to change, especially from teachers who have been teaching for a long time, is a psychological obstacle that must be faced. Not a few teachers view PLC as an additional administrative burden rather than a professional forum that encourages self-development. In this context, the transformative leadership role of principals and senior teachers is indispensable to build motivation and trust. As explained by Fullan (2001), meaningful change in school culture must start with visionary and inclusive leadership.

Strategies to address these challenges include integrating PLC activities into teachers' formal working hours and providing training on how to carry out effective collaborative practices. In addition, it is important to establish an institutional support system such as the availability of collaboration spaces, access to student learning data, and the role of facilitators who accompany the process. According to Stoll et al. (2006), the success of PLCs is greatly influenced by the supporting organizational structure and the clarity of mutually agreed roles and goals. In the Indonesian context, the implementation of the Independent Driving School and Curriculum program is an important opportunity to strengthen the PLC culture through structured spaces for reflection and collaboration.

Teacher leadership can also be developed through a distributive model, where leadership responsibilities are distributed to various individuals in the organization, rather than just centered on the principal. This model opens up space for teachers to take on leadership roles according to their respective expertise and contexts. Spillane (2006) states that distributive leadership encourages the emergence of innovation from below and strengthens the sense of collective responsibility in decision-making. In PLC, this can be implemented by appointing a study area coordinator teacher or PLC facilitator who routinely facilitates meetings and supports their colleagues.

In addition, the coaching and mentoring approach between teachers has also proven to be effective in supporting the sustainability of PLCs. Senior teachers can act as mentors for young teachers, while peer coaching allows for two-way reflection that encourages practice improvement. Knight (2007) states that dialogue-based coaching is more effective than one-way training because it encourages teachers to find solutions to their own challenges through supportive and constructive conversations.

In the midst of the transformation of global education, the establishment of a strong PLC is a strategic instrument to increase the competitiveness of schools. PLC encourages uninterrupted professional learning, encourages teachers to be researchers in their own classrooms, and strengthens connectivity between educators across disciplines. This is important in dealing with the complexity of the curriculum, differentiating student needs, and rapid technological changes. As emphasized by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), collaborative and contextual professional development is much more impactful than short-term technical training.

In conclusion, the success of Professional Learning Communities relies heavily on the synergy between teacher leadership and sustainable collaborative practices. Teachers who have leadership capacity, both formal and informal, can be a driver of significant

change in their communities. Collaboration based on trust, shared vision, and commitment to student learning will create a dynamic and transformative school culture. For this reason, it is important for education policies and school leadership to create the space, time, and structural support that allows for the growth of PLCs authentically and sustainably.

2. METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to deeply understand the role of teacher leadership and collaborative practices in building professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore the meanings, perceptions, and complex social dynamics in the context of collaborative learning in an educational environment.

Data were obtained through two main methods: literature studies and semi-structured interviews. Literature studies were conducted by analyzing a variety of academic literature sources, including Scopus indexed journals, textbooks, and education policy documents relevant to PLC topics, teacher leadership, and collaborative practice. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted with 10 teachers from five secondary schools who had actively implemented PLC practices. Respondents were selected purposively based on their experiences and involvement in collaborative activities at school.

Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, by identifying key patterns that emerged from teachers' narratives, such as informal leadership forms, collaboration mechanisms, structural barriers, and institutional support. The results of the analysis were compared with the findings of the literature to establish triangulation and strengthen validity.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results show that the success of the formation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is strongly influenced by the active role of teachers in instructional leadership and involvement in collaborative practice. Teachers who are able to take on the role of leaders, both in formal and informal structures, have proven to be the main drivers in building a culture of collaboration in schools. From the interviews conducted, most of the informants stated that teachers' initiative in facilitating reflective meetings, leading learning data discussions, and sharing best practices is essential to creating a dynamic and productive PLC.

The role of teacher leadership is reflected in their ability to build a vision of shared learning. Teachers who have a positive influence are usually able to direct colleagues to clear instructional goals, while also creating a work environment that supports collaboration. This is in line with the findings of York-Barr and Duke (2004) who emphasize that teacher leadership does not have to be structural, but rather the capacity to influence, inspire, and guide colleagues in improving the quality of learning. In the context of more advanced schools, teachers are even actively becoming facilitators of curriculum development, teaching supervisors, and dialogue partners of school principals in designing school quality improvement strategies.

Collaborative practices that emerged from field data include regular subject team meetings, discussions based on student exam results, and project-based learning developed across classes. In these forums, teachers not only share information, but also reflect together on the obstacles faced in teaching and seek collective solutions. In addition, the use of digital platforms such as Google Drive, WhatsApp Group, and local LMS also strengthens collaborative practices asynchronously. These findings reinforce the argument

of Stoll et al. (2006) that sustainable collaboration is at the heart of successful PLCs, especially when teachers feel heard, valued, and given space to contribute equally.

One of the positive impacts of structured PLC practices is the increased sense of collective efficacy of teachers. Teachers stated that regular collaboration gives them confidence that learning challenges can be overcome together. They feel more confident to try new learning strategies because there is a support system that allows for the exchange of ideas and mutual evaluation. Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004) cite this collective efficacy as an important indicator in improving student learning outcomes, because teachers tend to be more proactive, innovative, and reflective in designing teaching.

On the other hand, a number of challenges were also found in the implementation of PLC. The main challenges that arise are time constraints and synchronous schedules. Many teachers complain that the heavy administrative burden and teaching tasks make it difficult for them to attend collaborative meetings regularly. In addition, resistance from some of the more senior teachers is also an obstacle, especially when they feel that PLC activities only add to the workload without clear results. This reflects the need for a wise managerial approach from school leaders so that PLC activities are not instructive, but are born from the needs and desires of teachers to learn together. Fullan (2001) emphasized the importance of transformative leadership in transforming the school organizational culture into an environment that supports continuous learning.

Another challenge is the lack of facilitation and critical reflection skills among teachers. Not all teachers have experience leading professional discussions or analyzing learning data systematically. Therefore, training related to collaborative strategies, the use of data for instructional planning, and professional communication skills are urgently needed. In this case, the presence of external facilitators or professional coaches can help strengthen the capacity of teachers in carrying out their leadership roles in PLC. Knight (2007) called the dialogue-based coaching approach as one of the effective strategies in building trust, openness, and professional competence among fellow teachers.

School culture also plays an important role in the success of PLCs. Schools that have a collaborative climate tend to be more successful in maintaining PLC practices because of mutual trust between teachers, openness to new ideas, and sharing habits. In contrast, schools with competitive or hierarchical cultures show a tendency to resist and formality in the implementation of PLC. Leithwood et al. (2007) state that leadership that distributes roles fairly and allows space for shared decision-making can change school dynamics to be more collaborative and responsive to students' learning needs.

The results of this study also show that structural support is needed to support the sustainability of PLCs. School principals who provide special time space, develop a rotation schedule for collaborative activities, and integrate PLCs into school planning have been proven to strengthen the sustainability of practices. Some schools even set teacher performance indicators that include participation in learning community activities. This approach is considered to encourage teachers to view PLC as part of professional development, rather than as an additional obligation.

Apart from the internal side of schools, education policies also have a major influence on strengthening PLCs. In Indonesia, for example, the Merdeka Learning and Driving Schools programs provide a framework and training that encourages reflection, collaboration, and data-based learning. This program can be used as an ecosystem that unites PLC values in the school system. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) affirm that

effective professional learning must be sustainable, collaborative, and relevant to the context of teaching in the field.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that teacher leadership and collaborative practice are the main foundations in the formation of effective PLCs. Teachers are not only curriculum implementers, but also learning leaders who are able to move the professional community towards continuous improvement. Authentically built collaboration results in a school environment that is more reflective, participatory, and adaptive to change. In the face of increasingly complex educational challenges, strengthening PLC is a relevant and strategic strategy to improve the quality of teaching and overall student learning outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION

This research confirms that teacher leadership and collaborative practices play a central role in forming effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in schools. Teachers who act as learning leaders not only encourage the creation of a shared instructional vision, but also become the main driver in building a reflective and sustainable collaborative culture. Collaborative practices such as data-driven discussions, teaching team meetings, and peer coaching have been shown to increase teachers' collective efficacy and have a positive impact on learning quality.

Although various challenges such as time constraints, resistance to change, and lack of facilitation skills are still to be found, strategies such as continuous training, distribution of leadership roles, and structural support from schools can be effective solutions. A school culture that is open, supportive, and respects collective learning is an important foundation in the successful implementation of PLC.

Thus, the sustainability of PLCs depends on synergy between teacher leadership, institutional support, and supportive education policies. In the context of rapid educational changes, PLC is a relevant strategy to improve the quality of teaching and overall student learning outcomes.

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