


Unveiling the Practices and Challenges of Professional Learning Community in a Malaysian Chinese Secondary School

SAGE Open
April-June 2020: 1–11
© The Author(s) 2020
DOI: 10.1177/2158244020925516
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


Wei Chuan Chua¹, Lei Mee Thien¹ , Shun Yi Lim¹,
Chee Seng Tan¹, and Teik Ee Guan²

Abstract

Professional learning community (PLC) studies in the Asian Chinese nations remain scarce despite the emerging interest in the practice of PLC beyond the Western context. This study attempts to provide an understanding of the practices of PLC and challenges in implementing PLC in a Malaysian Chinese culture-dominated secondary school. This qualitative study used a phenomenological constructivist approach as a strategy of inquiry. Semi-structured interview data were collected from six middle leaders and ordinary teachers in a national-type Chinese secondary school in the northern region. Findings informed three existing PLC practices at the school level, namely, (a) peer coaching, (b) sharing of personal practices, and (c) professional development courses. However, the practice of PLC encounters various challenges, including excessive workload, teachers' passive attitudes, unsupportive conditions in the school, poor execution of PLC by the school community, and a vague understanding of PLC. Interestingly, this study identified two uncovered challenges hindering the development of PLC: misconception about PLC and lack of supervision from the authority. Implications and future studies are presented.

Keywords

chinese schools, interview, Malaysia, professional learning community (PLC), qualitative research design

Introduction

Educational reform has ultimately hinged on the capacity of teachers to realize the importance of changes in their teaching practices around the globe (Luyten & Bazo, 2019). Teacher professional development is, therefore, central to improving education systems. The concept of professional learning community (PLC) has been introduced to address the issue of students' achievement gap as it poses positive teacher professional development and stimulated changes in teaching practices (Kruse & Johnson, 2017; Luyten & Bazo, 2019; Qiao et al., 2018). Teachers who are participating in PLC are able to be involved in professional dialogues with other teachers of the same expertise. Moreover, teachers' involvement in PLC helps them to improve their pedagogical skills in teaching (Kruse & Johnson, 2017). Through PLC, teachers are receptive to new ideas and adopt different teaching practices (J. C. Lee et al., 2011) to cater to more diverse needs of students, which indirectly helps to motivate students in learning (Stoll et al., 2006).

Many countries are starting to adopt PLC as one of the strategies to support education reform worldwide, including Asia Pacific regions (Pang & Wang, 2016). Malaysia is not an exception. In Malaysia, empowering teachers through "creating a peer-led culture of professional excellence" or

PLC has been one of the local government's initiatives where the qualities of teachers are at stake as stated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) launched a module about the practices of PLC to be disseminated to all public schools advocating the practice of lesson study, learning walks, peer coaching, and teacher-sharing session (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

Recognition with the PLC initiatives from the education authorities has prompted numbers of PLC empirical studies in Malaysia. However, Malaysian PLC studies are limited to comparing the level of PLC practices between high- and low-performing public schools quantitatively (Ismail et al., 2014). Understanding the PLC practices and challenges in implementing PLC remains scarce in the Malaysian school context. On the contrary, it is crucial to highlight that context plays a vital role in determining the form of PLCs in different

¹Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

²Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia

Corresponding Author:

Lei Mee Thien, School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Minden 11800, Malaysia.
Email: thienleimee@usm.my



education systems (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012) as the context determines the development, form, and functions of PLC (Pang & Wang, 2016; Zhang & Pang, 2016). In Malaysia, the contextual factor could be attributed to the different mediums of instruction with dissimilar school culture in different types of Malaysian secondary schools. For instance, national schools with the Malay language as the medium of instruction may implement PLC practices, whereas the national-type schools with the Mandarin language as the medium of instruction may not suggest common PLC practices and challenges.

Notably, PLC practices and challenges faced by Malaysian National-Type Chinese Secondary Schools (NTCSSs) are under-researched in literature. Literature revealed that research on PLC mainly focus on the Western context (Zhang et al., 2017; Zhang & Pang, 2016) with studies in the Asian Chinese nations remaining scarce despite the emerging interest in the practice of PLC beyond the Western nations (Ho et al., 2019; Qiao et al., 2018; Zhang & Pang, 2016). This is a significant research gap, considering that PLC is context-specific (Ho et al., 2019; Zhang & Pang, 2016). In other words, the context shapes the practice of PLC (Ho et al., 2019). By tackling this research gap, the current study attempts to shed new insights into the practice of PLC and its challenges in a Malaysian NTCSS which is dominated by the Chinese ethnic group.

Research Question 1: What are the existing PLC practices in the selected NTCSS?

Research Question 2: What are the challenges in implementing PLC in the selected NTCSS?

This study has contributed and extended the PLC literature by providing a better understanding about the PLC practices and challenges in a non-Western Chinese school context. The findings of this study would shed light on the enhancement of teachers' professional practices in Malaysian Chinese school contexts.

Theoretical Grounding

PLC is commonly perceived as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). In the education context, PLC refers to the initiative of a group of educators who are committed and collaborate continuously by making enquiries and doing action research to improve the students' performance in schools (DuFour et al., 2006). PLC takes the notion that teachers are to reflect on their teaching practices rather than taking it for granted and confining their knowledge gap (Dewey, 1986) as, according to Bernstein (1992), acquisition of knowledge takes place effectively from sharing rather than isolating it. The critical element of PLC is on a "collective focus on professional learning" whereby teachers

reflect upon their teaching practices together and perform as professionals to improvise their practices in a positive manner (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017). In other words, PLC is a cyclic process of giving new input to the students upon teachers' reflective enquiries (Stoll et al., 2006). According to Kruse et al. (1995) as well as Louis and Marks (1998), PLC has five elements: reflective dialogues, deprivatization of practice, collaboration, shared sense of purpose, and being collective.

There are various definitions and concepts being proposed by scholars (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2006; Hord, 1997; Louis & Marks, 1998). A relatively legitimate definition of PLC revolves around five dimensions, namely, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, shared and supportive leadership, and supportive conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997). These five mentioned dimensions have strongly underpinned the PLC practices in Malaysia toward school effectiveness and improvement (Abdullah, 2017). In the Malaysian school context, shared values and vision between the teachers and school leaders enable PLC to serve a purpose toward a mutually consented goal for the school's being (Abdullah, 2017). In addition, school administrators are also willing to share leadership with teachers, being leaders who practice distributive leadership and always give support to teachers in the implementation of PLC (Abdullah & Ghani, 2014). Apart from that, teachers are collaborating in PLC and they work as a team as improving the performance of students has become a collective responsibility involving all teachers as a whole (Abdullah, 2017).

Literature Review

Previous studies in Western countries revealed that students' high level of achievement in schools is closely related to the level of collaboration among teachers in practice, such as evaluation on curriculum and selection of suitable instructional strategies for students (Goddard et al., 2007; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Even though PLC is proved for improving the professional development of teachers and the academic excellence of students (Doğan et al., 2016; Selcuk & Alyson, 2018), PLC can only be well established as a professional culture when teachers start to play an active role in investing themselves with new knowledge through enquiry and sharing (Kincheloe, 2012). Teachers shift in teaching strategies after participating in PLC can only be sustained if PLC is to be conducted in a continuous manner and not on an on-off basis (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017). Teachers can practice what they learnt not only for students but also for themselves (Timperley, 2011) to ensure meaningful impact for the practitioners. Carpenter's (2015) findings show that support from the school leaders is also one of the determining factors in the success of PLC as well as support at the district level (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Moreover, PLC is not just confined to teachers, and the

involvement of students should be addressed by engaging students in the process of teaching and learning to enable reflection to be made by the teachers (Ann-Christine & Ulf, 2017). In addition to this, collaboration across sites (Benson et al., 2007; Harnisch et al., 2014) including the outside community in PLC is a plus point as the community is a broader curriculum for the teaching and learning context (Bruce, 2008).

Beyond the Western setting, in China, PLC is slowly gaining recognition from the community and stakeholders (Qiao et al., 2018), despite PLC being at an infancy level upon implementation at the national, provincial, county, district, and school levels (Paine & Fang, 2006). Previous Asian studies have highlighted issues arising from the implementation of PLC. Zhang et al. (2017) highlighted barriers in implementing PLC as perceived by both teachers and administrators in Shanghai school contexts. Teachers perceived insufficient timing, unsupportive leadership from administrators, unfavorable accountability system, and lack of collaboration of teachers in culture as the barriers to implementing PLC (Zhang et al., 2017). Other challenges include overwhelming workload for teachers and lack of a thorough understanding of the concept and implementation of PLC (Hairon & Tan, 2017). Meanwhile, administrators regard poor financial power, passive teachers, unfavorable accountability policy, and external resources crisis as the obstacles to the success of PLC (Zhang et al., 2017). To resolve the barriers stated above and provide betterment of PLC, school administrators should provide support for teachers and exhibit a distributive leadership practice with teachers (Qiao et al., 2018; Wang, 2016).

On the contrary, Zhang and Pang (2016) conceptualized PLC practices in terms of collaborative learning, professional competency, facilitative leadership, structural support, and cultural barriers based on the findings of an empirical study conducted in Shanghai Chinese schools. Wang (2016) found that the actual practices of PLCs in two high-achieving senior high schools in Northeast China were characterized by collective enquiry, collaboration, and shared practices. Wang (2016) further emphasized that institutionalized collaborative teams were perceived to be effective in facilitating collaborations as well as spontaneous conversations among teachers. Apart from that, researchers in Taiwan claimed that the practice of PLC is positively associated with elements, such as shared vision, supportive and shared leadership, and collegial trust in order for the teachers to collaborate effectively and reflect upon each other while practicing PLC (Chen et al., 2016).

Research Context

Unlike other countries that administer a homogeneous education system to students, Malaysia, being a pluralistic country, permits the learning of mother tongue, with students learning the country's national language, *Bahasa Melayu*, as

the prerequisite (H. K. Lee, 2004). Thus, NTCSSs were established with the Chinese language being the medium of instruction in schools (Y. S. Tan & Teoh, 2015). NTCSS is one of the choices for Malaysian Chinese parents to enroll their children in secondary schools.

It should be noted that NTCSSs are also labeled as conforming schools (*Gaizhi Zhongxue*) as this type of school was required to convert to the national medium policy, which is *Malay* language, in the early 1960s in exchange for state funding (grants-in-aid). NTCSSs that did not conform to this state policy had to exist as Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSSs) or *Duli Zhongxue* (*Duzhong*) deprived of state funding (Santhiram & Tan, 2015). Siah et al. (2015) only perceived that ICSSs have Confucian heritage cultural values as reflected in their school mottos, teaching, and school syllabus as well as extracurricular activities. Therefore, perceiving NTCSSs are influenced by Confucian heritage culture is somewhat inadequate. As such, a discussion between Confucian heritage culture and PLC at NTCSS is not the scope of this current study.

This study was conducted in an NTCSS that is situated in the northern region of Malaysia. Being a cluster school of excellence, this NTCSS exhibits strong academic performance in public examinations besides having a niche area in cocurricular activities and aspires to be an international-level institution. The school actively involves in PLC activities. The school is continually building a network with others beyond the school area by organizing international student camps and international conferences, allowing students from different cultures and nations as well as professionals into the school for knowledge and culture exchange. The school often has exchange programs and relations with international institutions, such as Hwa Chong Institution in Singapore, Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, and a secondary school in the Hokkien province of China. Hence, the practices and challenges of the implementation of PLC in this selected NTCSS deserve to be explored. Also, the current study has contributed to the PLC literature by extending the PLC studies in NTCSS as most of previous local studies had focused on primary and secondary national schools.

Method

This qualitative study used a phenomenological constructivist approach because the current study attempts to provide a deep understanding of practices and challenges of PLC in a selected NTCSS. According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological constructivist approach is a strategy of inquiry to enable the researchers to obtain data based on individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. In this study, understanding individuals' common experiences are pivotal to develop a deeper understanding of the features of PLC practices and challenges in NTCSSs. Hence, a phenomenological constructivist approach is an appropriate approach to be used due its superiority in describing the respondents'

Table 1. Sample Demographic Background.

Respondent	Gender	Years of teaching	Position	Teaching subjects
R1	Male	31	Middle leader	Physic
R2	Male	29	Middle leader	Mathematics
R3	Male	13	Ordinary teacher	English
R4	Female	20	Ordinary teacher	Malay language
R5	Female	22	Ordinary teacher	Chemistry
R6	Female	27	Middle leader	English language

ideas, experiences, and practices in their implementation of PLC in the school.

Sample

The school consists of 10 school administrators and 173 ordinary teachers. This study used purposive sampling for sample selection. We selected the respondents from both middle leaders and ordinary teacher categories to ensure the representativeness of the respondents. In the Malaysian school context, middle leaders refer to intermediate personnel between ordinary teachers and critical administrators, whereas the ordinary teacher refers to the academic teachers. However, only three middle leaders and three ordinary teachers agreed to be the respondents (three male and three female teachers). Their ages were between 38 and 58 years. They are responsible for teaching academic subjects, such as mathematics, science, and language and hold positions in school committees and cocurricular activities. Their participation is solely on a voluntary basis. Table 1 shows the sample demographic background.

Interview Questions

The interviews were directed toward the respondents' personal experiences about PLC practices and challenges in implementing PLC. The interview questions were developed in such a way that they were broad enough to obtain meaningful responses from the interviewees (Bruce et al., 2004). Four questions were designed to obtain differing and complementary viewpoints from the respondents about PLC practices and the challenges of their implementation in the school. The interview questions were pilot tested with four in-service secondary school teachers to ensure the appropriateness of the questions. After discussions with the researchers, the interview questions were revised, based on teachers' feedback, before the one-to-one interview was conducted. The interview questions are as follows.

1. What do you know about PLC?
2. How does your department implement PLC?
3. What kind of activities do you carry out under the name of PLC?
4. What are the challenges when implementing PLC?

The first three interview questions addressed the first research question (What are the existing PLC practices at the school level?), whereas the fourth question addressed the second research question (What are the challenges when implementing PLC?).

Data Collection Procedure

This study secured consent from the local authorities, namely, the MoE, state education department, and school principal. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the six selected respondents on a one-to-one basis. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were employed so that the respondents could express their responses without any restriction besides permitting them to speak in any language that they feel comfortable in conversing with. Each interview session lasted for about 45 min. After collecting the interview data, the researchers converted audiotape recording into text data through transcription. The transcripts in languages other than English were translated into English by the researchers. Pseudonyms are indicated as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, and R6 to avoid the identification of the interviewees.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis takes the form of constant comparative analysis, whereby themes were identified and coded as they surfaced. The data were analyzed iteratively, involving repeated readings of transcripts, comparing, and contrasting them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each transcript, the data were explored by reading it several times to obtain the general sense of the data followed by coding it. The researchers cross-compared with each interview transcripts to identify patterns, similarities, and differences between each data set. The text was divided into segments of information, with each segment labeled with codes. The existing codes were reduced by eliminating redundancy of codes and reducing overlaps. The codes were then combined into categories of coding and further synthesized into themes (Creswell, 2012).

Findings and Discussion

The three middle leaders were anonymously referred to as R1, R2, and R6, whereas the three ordinary teachers were referred to as R3, R4, and R5.

PLC Practices

Three themes emerged from the interview data: (a) peer coaching, (b) sharing of personal practices, and (c) professional development courses of the existing PLC practices at the school level.

Peer coaching. The current initiatives for PLC practiced by both middle leaders and teachers did not show much deviation from each other. Most of the middle leaders and teachers practiced peer coaching. The respondents would choose another teacher as their partner and they would participate in their partner's class when their partner was teaching and vice versa. After observation, both of the teachers would meet up and have a thorough discussion, giving each other constructive comments on how to improve their current teaching practices. The discussion usually revolves around one specific topic in the syllabus. It could be deduced that teachers in the school preferred peer coaching under the dimension of sharing personal practices of PLC (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997).

R4: I have my partner. While she is conducting her class, I will walk into her class and I observe her. Then she will do the same thing to me. And then we will exchange ideas for improvement. Let say if we see that there are weaknesses or strengths of the lesson, we will let each other know.

R5: I teach and he or she will also be teaching the same lessons. Then we observe each other and we give comments and exchange our experiences.

Sharing of personal practices. In the formal meetings, the respondents rarely shared personal practices with other teachers on how to teach difficult topics based on their experience for knowledge exchange between teachers due to priorities in the meeting agenda. Mostly, the respondents would discuss official matters with other teachers, including the syllabus to be covered, how to design exam questions and marking scheme, and review of students' performance reports. Sharing of personal practices also occurred in daily interactions when the junior teachers approached senior teachers for consultation on academic matters, but the interactions remained scarce. Respondents also showed initiative to conduct lesson study for specific difficult topics in the syllabus, but it was found by researchers to be on occasion.

The sharing of personal practices was interpreted to be restricted only to the teacher's partner whom they knew well, other than the academic teachers under the same panel. Senior teachers in the school also shared their personal teaching experience with the junior teachers when there was an enquiry about it. The senior teachers did not show any initiative to share their knowledge with other teachers, but it was done upon request. The evidence showed the face-saving

nature (Lai et al., 2010) possessed by the Chinese teachers in the school. The teachers themselves preferred to be passive, waiting for others to approach them for enquiry and consultation. In pairing up for peer coaching within the same school, the teachers preferred to team up with other teachers whom they knew well, suggesting that they were not receptive to new ideas. A deficiency in collegial trust in the school would nurture an unsupportive condition to practice PLC (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997).

Apart from conducting PLC at the school level, respondents claimed that teachers also attended professional development courses to learn how to mark papers and set exam questions as well as teach students how to answer exam questions. These teachers would have in-house training with other teachers for knowledge sharing. Besides, professionals outside the school were invited for sharing personal practices that focused on marking scheme in helping students to answer exam questions.

R2: The teachers in our zone will automatically invite speakers from other states to come to us to explain how we should set questions for students and how the students should answer based on the questions given.

R3: Of course we will invite outsiders to come into the school to talk to us. Or sometimes we send teachers to courses on how to mark exam papers. When they come back, we will request them to conduct a sharing session with other teachers.

The qualitative findings revealed that the current PLC practices in the selected NTCSS were associated with a strong emphasis on academic performance by the Chinese community (Ang, 2017). This scenario can be seen as the PLC practices are mainly resolved to improving the academic performance of students in the school. In other words, the school culture has shaped how PLC is practiced by the teachers (Mohd Yaakob & Yunus, 2016).

However, there was a contradicting idea in financial support perceived by both middle leaders and ordinary teachers. Although ordinary teachers clearly stated that the administrators did not provide any financial support for the implementation of PLC, middle leaders claimed that the school leaders allocated a fund for them to practice PLC by supporting in terms of food and subsidy for teaching resources. The finding showed that a communication gap between the teachers and administrators existed, which posed an obstacle to practicing PLC.

Challenges in Implementing PLC

Challenges in implementing PLC were discussed with middle leaders and ordinary teachers, respectively. Three themes emerged from the interview data: (a) teachers' passive roles, (b) inconsistency in practicing PLC, and (c) students' attitudes perceived by middle leaders.

Teachers' passive roles. Middle leaders pointed out that the majority of teachers in the school have developed a ready mind-set, thinking that they were right in terms of teaching practices. Hence, they felt reluctant to ask opinions from others.

R1: The challenge is . . . every teacher thinks that they have done well in teaching. If I have done well in teaching, I might as well save it. If I ask them, it would seem like I am losing to them.

R2: We have different types of teachers in this school. For some teachers, if you give them some work, some will execute 50% of it or maybe 30% of the tasks given. They still do it, but not in a good way. This is the teacher aspect of the problem. It all depends on the teachers themselves.

Teachers having an ego by being unwilling to ask opinions from other teachers regarding their teaching practices was a phenomenon in the school. The ego grew with time, which resulted in senior teachers having a higher ego and were reluctant to share teaching practices with other teachers. Findings reflected that teachers preferred to be in their comfort zone handling their personal affairs.

As mainly Chinese teachers populate the Chinese school, the teachers refrained from asking other teachers, so as to save face (Lai et al., 2010). Teachers would not risk themselves asking other teachers to give opinions on their teaching practices as they regarded this as a sign of degrading their status (Lai et al., 2010). With such a mind-set, teachers tend to opt for a passive role in the context of PLC, whereby they were not actively engaged while discussing suitable instructional strategies for students and teaching practices. The teachers tend to wait for orders from the school on how to do it. The teachers did not have the self-motivation in initiating the practice of PLC themselves. By behaving passively, the teachers have lost the opportunity for professional development (Dewey, 1986).

R1: The face-saving culture in the school influenced the practice of PLC making teachers passive. The passive role by teachers could also be exemplified in the mere interaction between the junior teachers (less than five years of experience in the school) and senior teachers (10 years and above of experience in the school) in discussing academic subjects and pedagogical strategies.

Inconsistency in practicing PLC. PLC was conducted in an inconsistent manner, whereby it was just done on an on-off basis. As pointed out by R1, "PLC should not just run a project only. It should be a continuous program. Not to say that we have a program for this month under PLC and we have nothing for the other months."

For the middle leaders, PLC was only conducted twice or four times in a year with no follow-up action in between the programs. Thus, the practices of PLC could not be impactful

for teachers as they only meet a few times a year to sit down to discuss their problems while teaching in the class or the students' academic problems. Even though the teachers were able to come up with new teaching strategies to tackle the common problems faced by teachers, teachers could only show a minimal shift to the strategies if the teachers were to practice it in a specific time frame only.

Establishing a PLC takes time (Wells & Feun, 2007), and thus the practice of PLC should be enhanced with more consistent practice of it among the teachers so that the teachers can slowly adapt to the culture of PLC (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017).

Students' attitudes. Although teachers had better teaching strategies for students in the class after participating in PLC, students might not be interested in engaging in part because they did not have an interest in what the teacher was conducting in class. Sometimes, new teaching practices learned by teachers require students' involvement. The lack of cooperation from students and their poor performance in class might somehow give negative feedback to teachers and thus demotivate them. Students' engagement in class affects the teachers' emotional and organizational support as the relation between teachers and students is bidirectional (Curby et al., 2014). Teachers who aspired to improve the students' performance tend to expect the students to be actively engaged in the classroom (Houser & Waldbuesser, 2017). When the outcome from the students is not what the teachers expect, it can demotivate teachers to a great extent leading them to stop continuing the new teaching strategies that they learnt through PLC.

R2: Students are also a headache for the teachers. Some of them do not have the motivation to learn in class. Sometimes even though if you teach them with all will, they do not care about it.

R6: Sometimes if we want to have some activities in class, the students do not show active participation in it.

The findings are not surprising as Chinese school students are known for being academically competitive (Ang, 2017). Chinese students are highly expected by their parents to uphold their family name (Lai et al., 2010). Due to the Chinese's natural hardworking attribute (Wan Husin, 2012), the Chinese students in the school were conditioned to drilling and practices (Lim, 2003). In other words, students prefer the traditional teacher-centered method of teaching and learning, whereby the input is constantly given by the teacher to the students. On the contrary, one of the key aspects of the practice of PLC was to incorporate fun in learning for students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). To make teaching and learning fun for students, teachers were likely to conduct more student-centered teaching strategies compared with the traditional teaching and drilling, which made students resistant toward the new learning atmosphere.

Under a competitive learning environment, students tend to resist shifting to the new teaching strategy as they are adapted to the conventional education system, which contributes to their academic success.

On the contrary, three themes emerged from the interview data: (a) overwhelming workload, (b) class size problem, and (c) lack of administrative support perceived by ordinary teachers.

Overwhelming workload. Teachers in the school not only need to handle the academic affairs of students, but they also need to handle cocurricular and administrative matters. When most teachers are busy handling such matters, it is difficult to find time when everybody can sit down together and discuss properly.

R3: An actual PLC is when we invite another teacher into our class and observe our teaching. Then we try to improve our teaching methods. However, it is difficult to find a partner to enter the same class as us because each of us does not have the same teaching timetable, and we find it hard to match our time.

Teachers nowadays are bombarded with various clerical work such as updating the information of students through an online system, collecting fees from students, and analyzing students' background information for certain purposes (Taharim et al., 2017). A few examples of the system, which contribute to the issue addressed include School-Based Assessment, School Examination Analysis System, and Student Database Application. Teachers being showered by excessive workload will be unmotivated in practicing PLC as they are burnt out (Capers, 2004; Hairon & Tan, 2017; Taharim et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2017).

Class size problem. For effective teaching and learning in class, the ideal student to teacher ratio is suggested as 16:1 by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, in reality, most classes had around 30 to 40 students on average, implying that the ratio was still far away from the international average. Teachers handling a large class found it challenging to incorporate PLC in the classroom as they need to cater to the more diverse needs of the students. Students' involvement in a large classroom could not be made to the maximum to instill fun in learning under the teaching strategies of PLC. Teachers are prone to develop a positive attitude and a collective responsibility toward students' learning when they are teaching in a classroom of smaller size (V. E. Lee & Loeb, 2000). The culture of PLC could be facilitated if PLC was conducted in smaller sized classes (Williams et al., 2009).

Lack of administrative support. In the implementation of PLC, teachers complained that they did not receive support from

the administrators. According to the teachers, the school did not provide any financial support for the programs of PLC as what the middle leaders proclaimed. The school also did not allocate a specific time slot for the PLC discussion for gathering of teachers with the same interest. For the teachers, PLC was only done informally and based on the teachers' initiative. In this context, support from the school leaders includes arranging time and providing resources for teachers to practice PLC (Hord, 2004). School support is always the leading factor in culturing PLC in school (Huffman et al., 2015; Qiao et al., 2018; Wang, 2016). Without adequate support from the key administrators, the practice of PLC will eventually phase out when the teachers stop investing their initiative in practicing it.

Uncovered Challenges of the Implementation of PLC

Interestingly, the researchers have identified two themes of uncovered challenges hindering the development of PLC in the selected NTCSS. The themes were misconceptions about PLC and lack of supervision from the authority.

Misconception of PLC. Some of the middle leaders perceived the concept of PLC inappropriately. This can be seen as one middle leader perceived PLC as a panel meeting while another middle leader regarded PLC as the involvement of students in classroom discussion.

R2: We treat PLC as a panel meeting for teachers. In the meeting, we will discuss about what to teach, the syllabus, and the worksheets to be given out to the students.

R6: Sometimes, we will have a gallery walk whereby we ask students to present what they have learnt and paste them on the wall so that every student can view the findings from station to another.

In addition, many teachers in the school failed to notice the link between PLC and students' performance. They did not perceive PLC as a learning strategy benefiting both teachers and students (Kruse & Johnson, 2017; Qiao et al., 2018), creating a win-win situation. In an academic-emphasized Chinese school, teachers treated the performance of the students as their priority rather than their professional development. Teachers did not regard self-enrichment as a catalyst for improving the students' performances.

R4: We would like to focus on PLC, but our clients are the students. We have to focus more on the needs of the students . . . Our concern will be focused on the students as our priority. We must ensure them to have good results . . . PLC can be a part (of my teaching), but I cannot prioritize PLC and neglect my students. I have to prioritize the needs of my students first. Then I will pick up PLC along the way whenever I can.

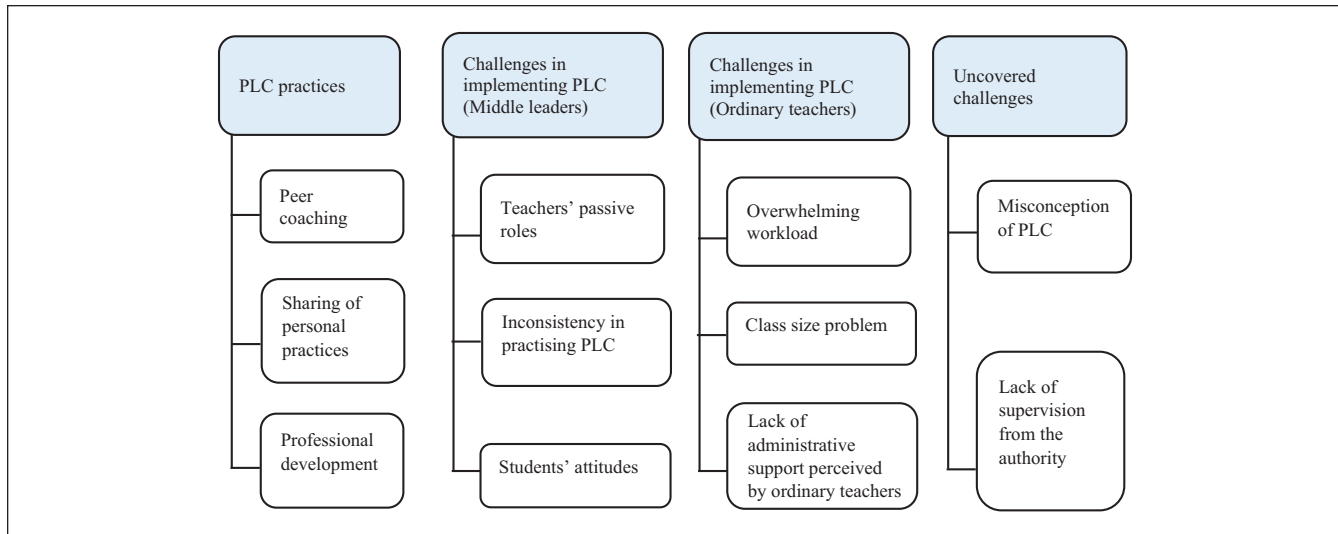


Figure 1. Findings of thematic analysis.

Note. PLC = professional learning community.

One of the possible causes of the misconception of PLC might be due to the top-down system in delivering the subject content. Teachers were only informed by the school administrators about the concept of PLC through in-house training after the school leaders attended courses in PLC. In between the delivery system, there might be a loss of substantial information about the concept of PLC, which caused ambiguities among teachers (Hairon & Tan, 2017). Even though teachers had questions regarding PLC, they did not feel obliged to ask for clarification due to their face-saving norm (Lai et al., 2010).

Lack of supervision from the authority. No interviewees reported the supervision of the outcome of PLC by key administrators or officials from the district level and above.

R3: We make documentation of PLC ourselves. We did not even submit our report to the authorities. So far, there are no officers from the State Education Department who come and inspect the outcome.

R5: Nobody from the school came and evaluated our practice.

The lack of supervision could be explained with the existing top-down centralized Malaysian education system. Teachers are informed that the District Education Office will evaluate the outcome of PLC from time to time based on the “outsite in” and “insite out” approach (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Supervision of school administrators and district officers is mandatory as teachers perceive the supervision as a sense of emphasis of the officials toward the PLC policy. With supervision, the officials are indirectly giving support, which is crucial toward the development of PLC in schools (Carpenter, 2015; Olivier & Huffman, 2016).

Otherwise, as claimed by R3, “Teachers in school might also perceive PLC as a ‘work of documentation’ only.” Overall, the findings of thematic analysis were illustrated in Figure 1.

Conclusion

A school establishing PLC is deemed to face culturally based challenges (Stoll et al., 2006; Wells & Feun, 2007). Thus, this study is conducted to unveil the practices and challenges concerning the initiatives of PLC implemented in the school. The study reveals that the teachers at school level practice PLC in terms of peer coaching. As for the sharing of personal practices, it usually involves a collaboration of the school teachers with professionals outside the school community. In the Malaysian Chinese school context, whereby the school culture upholds academic performance (Ang, 2017), the practice of PLC encounters various challenges. The challenges include excessive workload for teachers, teachers’ passive attitudes, unsupportive conditions in school, poor execution of PLC by the school community, and vague understanding of PLC. Most of the obstacles encountered correlate with previous findings in the Chinese (China) context (Qiao et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017).

For practical implications, administrators and teachers need to take an active approach in practicing PLC. The reason is that knowledge acquisition is facilitated by sharing between sources and not by isolating them (Bernstein, 1992). Teachers have to always reflect upon their teaching practices by enquiring about it from other teachers of the same expertise (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017). As Chinese students and teachers are used to drilling and repeated practice strategies (Lim, 2003), the administrators’ leadership must play a role in initiating the culture of PLC in the school (Qiao et al., 2018; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016; Wang, 2016). Overall, in

integrating PLC as a culture of the school, the school principal has to be the pioneer in initiating the practice to be followed by the teachers (Abdullah & Ghani, 2014).

For policy-making implication, findings of this current study could shed light on policy makers and stakeholders on the practice of PLC in a Chinese-dominated school. Policy making at the federal level always employs a “one size fits all” approach by issuing a single guideline for a new policy to be adopted by all schools regardless of the schools’ cultural backgrounds. Given that PLC is culture-dependent, this study has provided enlightenment to the relevant authorities when drafting further measures in the context of PLC..

This study has some limitations. First, this study only involved six ordinary teachers and middle leaders from a Malaysian Chinese secondary school to explore in-depth about the way PLC is executed at the school level. This study should include school leaders’ perceptions of the practice of PLC and how it is conducted at the administration level. Second, this study is limited to a specific Malaysian Chinese secondary school pertaining to the PLC practices and challenges in implementing PLC in the school. Third, as mentioned in the “Research context” section, ICSS or *Duli Zhongxue* is another type of Chinese secondary schools in Malaysia that are immersed with Confucian heritage culture through their school environment. Thus, future studies could explore on how Confucian values influence the practices of PLC in ICSS.

The findings of the current study propose that future studies could include a larger number of teachers and administrators at school level by involving more Malaysian Chinese secondary schools or different types of Malaysian public schools. For example, ICSS that exist in a different context could be taken as a case study in future research. A mixed-methods approach is sought to be employed to ensure the triangulation of data in acquiring a comprehensive study of the practice of PLC in Malaysia in reality compared with the guidelines formulated at the federal level. In essence, this study has contributed to the knowledge in PLC literature by identifying additional factors in explaining the challenges of PLC in a Malaysian Chinese secondary school: (a) students’ attitudes toward learning, (b) misconception of PLC, and (c) lack of supervision from the authority. Future studies could enrich the PLC literature by exploring how these three factors impede the implementation of PLC at the school level.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Lei Mee Thien  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8626-9825>

References

- Abdullah, Z. (2017). *Komuniti Pembelajaran Professional di Malaysia* [Professional Learning Community in Malaysia]. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.
- Abdullah, Z., & Ghani, M. F. A. (2014). Professional learning community in secondary school community in Malaysia. *Journal of Education and Learning, 8*(3), 227–248.
- Ang, M. C. (2017). *Chinese education in Malaysia*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education. <http://education.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-220>
- Ann-Christine, W., & Ulf, B. (2017). Teachers and students together in a professional learning community. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 61*(1), 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0313831.2015.1066441>
- Benson, L., Harkavy, I., & Puckett, J. (2007). *Dewey’s dream: Universities and democracies in an age of education reform*. Temple University Press.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1992). *The new constellation*. MIT Press.
- Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Hawkey, K., & Greenwood, A. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities* (DfES Research Report 637). University of Bristol.
- Bruce, B. C. (2008). From Hull House to Paseo Boricua: The theory and practice of community inquiry. In B. Dicher & A. Luduşan (Eds.), *Philosophy of pragmatism (II): Salient inquiries* (pp. 181–198). European Studies Foundation.
- Bruce, B. C., Buckingham, L., Hynd, J., McMahon, C., Roggenkamp, M., & Stoodley, I. (2004). Ways of experiencing the act of learning to program: A phenomenographic study of introductory programming students at university. *Journal of Information Technology Education, 3*, 143–160.
- Capers, M. (2004). Epilogue: Teaching and shared professional practice—A history of resistance; a future dependent on its embrace. In S. M. Hord (Ed.), *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities* (pp. 151–162). Teachers College Press.
- Carpenter, D. (2015). School culture and leadership of professional learning communities. *International Journal of Educational Management, 29*(5), 682–694.
- Chauraya, M., & Brodie, K. (2017). Learning in professional learning communities: Shifts in mathematics teachers’ practices. *African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, 21*(3), 223–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0035919X.2017.1350531>
- Chen, P., Lee, C. D., Lin, H., & Zhang, C. X. (2016). Factors that develop effective professional learning communities in Taiwan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(2), 248–265.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Sage.
- Curby, T. W., Downer, J. T., & Booren, L. M. (2014). Behavioral exchanges between teachers and children over the course of a typical preschool day: Testing bidirectional associations. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 29*(2), 193–204.

- Dewey, J. (1986). Logic: The theory of inquiry. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works* (Vol. 12, pp. 1–506). Carbondale.
- Doğan, S., Pringle, R., & Mesa, J. (2016). The impacts of professional learning communities on science teachers' knowledge, practice and student learning: A review. *Professional Development in Education*, 42(4), 569–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2015.1065899>
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Teachers College Press.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. National Educational Service.
- Goddard, Y. L., Goddard, R. D., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2007). A theoretical and empirical investigation of teacher collaboration for school improvement and student achievement in public elementary schools. *Teacher College Record*, 109(4), 877–896.
- Hairon, S., & Dimmock, C. (2012). Singapore schools and professional learning communities: Teacher professional development and school leadership in an Asian hierarchical system. *Educational Review*, 64(4), 405–424.
- Hairon, S., & Tan, C. (2017). Professional learning communities in Singapore and Shanghai: Implications for teacher collaboration. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 47(1), 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2016.1153408>
- Harnisch, D. L., Comstock, S. L., & Bruce, B. C. (2014). Collaborative inquiry with technology in secondary science classrooms: Professional learning community development at work. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 11(5), 495–505. <https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2014.11.5.495>
- Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (Eds.). (2010). *Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its best*. Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Ho, J., Ong, M., & Tan, L. S. (2019). Leadership of professional learning communities in Singapore schools: The tight-loose balance. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219833698>
- Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Hord, S. M. (2004). *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities*. Teachers College Press.
- Houser, M. L., & Waldbuesser, C. (2017). Emotional contagion in the classroom: The impact of teacher satisfaction and confirmation on perceptions of student nonverbal classroom behavior. *College Teaching*, 65(1), 1–8.
- Huffman, J., Olivier, D., Wang, T., Chen, P., Hairon, S., & Pang, N. (2015). Global conceptualization of the professional learning community process: Transitioning from country perspectives to international commonalities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 19(3), 327–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2015.102034>
- Ismail, A., Baharom, N., & Abdullah, A. (2014). Professional learning community practices in high and low performing schools in Malaysia. *International Journal of Current Research and Academic Review*, 2(9), 159–164.
- Kincheloe, J. (2012). *Teacher as researchers. Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*. Routledge.
- Kruse, S. D., & Johnson, B. L. (2017). Tempering the normative demands of professional learning communities with the organizational realities of life in schools: Exploring the cognitive dilemmas faced by educational leaders. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 588–604.
- Kruse, S. D., Louis, K. S., & Bryk, A. S. (1995). An emerging framework for analysing school-based professional community. In K. S. Louis & S. D. Kruse (Eds.), *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools* (pp. 23–34). Corwin Press.
- Lai, F. S., Chong, S. C., Sia, B. K., & Ooi, B. C. (2010). Culture and consumer behaviour: Comparisons between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia. *International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology*, 1(2), 180–185.
- Lee, H. K. (2004). Globalisation and ethnic integration in Malaysian education. In S. Saw & K. Kesavapany (Eds.), *Malaysia: Recent trends and challenges* (pp. 230–259). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Lee, J. C., Zhang, Z., & Yin, H. (2011). A multilevel analysis of the impact of a professional learning community, faculty trust in colleagues and collective efficacy on teacher commitment to students. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(5), 820–830.
- Lee, V. E., & Loeb, S. (2000). School size in Chicago elementary schools: Effects on teachers' attitudes and students' achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1163470>
- Lim, C. S. (2003). Cultural differences and mathematics learning in Malaysia. *The Mathematics Educator*, 7(1), 110–122.
- Louis, K. S., & Marks, H. M. (1998). Does professional community affect the classroom? Teachers' work and student experiences in restructuring schools. *American Journal of Education*, 106(4), 532–574.
- Luyten, H., & Bazo, M. (2019). Transformational leadership, professional learning communities, teaching learning and learner centered teaching practices: Evidence on their interrelations in Mozambican primary education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 60(1), 14–31.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook of new methods* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2013). *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Preschool to postsecondary education)*.
- Mohd Yaakob, M. F., & Yunus, J. (2016). The relationship between school culture and professional learning community in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 6(12), 231–236. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v6-i12/2489>
- Olivier, D. F., & Huffman, J. B. (2016). Professional learning community process in the United States: Conceptualization of the process and district support for schools. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(2), 301–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1148856>
- Paine, L. W., & Fang, Y. (2006). Reform as hybrid model of teaching and teacher development in China. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 45(4–5), 279–289.
- Pan, Y. C. (2016, December). Chung Ling: Tolling to inspire the young. *Penang Monthly*, 13–15.
- Pang, N. S.-K., & Wang, T. (2016). Professional learning communities: Research and practices across six educational systems in the

- Asia-Pacific region. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(2), 193–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1148848>
- Qiao, X., Yu, S., & Zhang, L. (2018). A review of research on professional learning communities in mainland China (2006–2015). *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(5), 713–728. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217707523>
- Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S. O., McQueen, K., & Grissom, J. A. (2015). Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(3), 475–514. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215585562>
- Santhiram, R. R., & Tan, Y. S. (2015). *The development of Chinese education in Malaysia: Problems and challenges* (ISEAS Working Papers, 2, 1–28). <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-working-papers/the-development-of-chinese-education-in-malaysia-problems-and-challenges/>
- Selcuk, D., & Alyson, A. (2018). Effect of professional learning communities on teachers and students: Reporting updated results and raising questions about research design. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 29(4), 634–659. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2018.1500921>
- Siah, P. C., Ong Christina, S. B., Tan, S. M., & Sim, C. P. (2015). Perception on Chinese values: A comparison of Chinese secondary students studying at national secondary schools and Chinese independent schools in Malaysia. *The Social Science Journal*, 52, 62–68. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.soscij.2014.08.006>
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221–258.
- Taharim, N. F., Jayasuriya, D. P., Lim, W. X., & Mazhar, S. F. (2017). Clerical work for school teachers: A burden or a responsibility? *Journal of Humanities, Language, Culture and Business*, 1(3), 26–36.
- Tan, Y. S., & Teoh, H. S. (2015). The development of Chinese education in Malaysia, 1952–1975: Political collaboration between the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Chinese educationists. *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society*, 44(1), 83–100.
- Timperley, H. (2011). *Realizing the power of professional learning*. Open University Press.
- Vanblaere, B., & Devos, G. (2016). Relating school leadership to perceived professional learning community characteristics: A multilevel analysis. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 57, 26–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.03.003>
- Wang, T. (2016). School leadership and professional learning community: Case study of two senior high schools in Northeast China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(2), 202–216.
- Wan Husin, W. N. (2012). Cultural clash between the Malays and Chinese in Malaysia: An analysis on the formation and implementation of national cultural policy. In H. L. Chua & C. M. Zhang (Eds.), *2012 International Conference on Humanity, History and Society (IPEDR)* (pp. 1–6). IACSIT Press.
- Wells, C., & Feun, L. (2007). Implementation of learning community principles: A study of six high schools. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(2), 141–160.
- Williams, L., Cate, J., & O’Hair, M. J. (2009). The boundary-spanning role of democratic learning communities: Implementing the IDEALS. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37(4), 452–472.
- Zhang, J., & Pang, N. S.-K. (2016). Exploring the characteristics of professional learning communities in China: A mixed-method study. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 25(1), 11–21.
- Zhang, J., Yuan, R., & Yu, S. (2017). What impedes the development of professional learning communities in China? Perceptions from leaders and frontline teachers in three schools in Shanghai. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(2), 219–237.