

The Development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the Philippines: Roles and Views of Secondary School Principals

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Abstract

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of teacher engagement through professional learning communities (PLCs) as a new approach to teacher professional development. Unlike traditional approaches to teacher professional development, PLCs redefine professional development from programs that regard teachers as passive learners to programs that regard teachers as active learners responsible for their professional development. The study explored the roles and perspectives of secondary school principals in the development of PLCs in the Philippines. It is an underlying assumption that principals' understanding of their roles in the implementation of teacher professional development policies in schools is central to the formation of PLCs. This raised two important questions: How did principals view and implement national policies on teacher professional development in the school level? And, how did they perceive and establish PLCs in their schools? The study utilized a qualitative research methodology based on an interpretive paradigm. Through the use of semi-structured interviews alongside policy analysis, three main themes emerged: lack of continuing teacher professional development programs in the Philippines; varying views of principals in the development of PLCs in schools; and, effective leadership styles as key to support continuing professional development of teachers. The lack of continuing teacher professional development programs suggests that principals in the study failed to establish PLCs in their schools. This offers some important insights on the leadership experiences of principals in the implementation of national policies on professional development and how it affects their roles in supporting teachers' continuing professional development.

Keywords: professional learning communities, professional development, professional learning, principal leadership, school leadership, community of learning

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Introduction

The Philippines is going through massive transformation in its education system, from drastically changing the basic education curriculum, mass hiring of teachers and principals in the public schools, building of thousands of classrooms and to establishing more schools. These changes are part of the government's commitment to expand the access of the public to quality education. Despite this intent to increase the quality of education, it has been observed that less attention is drawn to improving the quality of teaching and learning. Many different educational reforms have been introduced, but most of them were focused on organizational changes, rather than looking closely at the problem behind the poor performance of many schools.

More than ten years ago, the Philippines had one of the best performing education systems in the South-East Asia. In 1998, a study conducted by the Graduate School of International Development of Nagoya University, Japan, showed that the literacy rate in the Philippines was quite high compared to other Asian countries (Toyooka, Kim, Tsuchiya, Ogura, & Kondo, 2000). In fact, the enrolment rate at the primary and secondary level of education was at 99.9% and 77.8 % respectively, ratings which were higher than Singapore's and the rest of the ASEAN countries (Toyooka et al., 2000). Almost ten years after the Nagoya University study was conducted, the quality of education in the Philippines deteriorated. The Australian Educational Researcher Journal reported in 2007 that the Philippines was lagging behind other countries when it came to basic education (Orleans, 2007). "The Philippines ranked almost at the bottom of the list of seventeen (17) nations that took part in [this] large-scale evaluation of educational achievement" (Orleans, 2007, p. 33). The reason behind this poor student achievement, as Orleans (2007) argues, is accounted for by factors outside and inside the classroom. When it comes to factors inside the classroom, he points out that teacher quality most affects student performance.

Improving teaching quality has always been one of the major challenges of the Philippine education system. Although efforts such as providing sufficient school infrastructure such as buildings and classrooms has been made in order to achieve quality education (Department of Education, 2014), the availability of resources to help teachers improve their performance is still considered poor. As a result, the Enhance Basic Education Act of 2013, commonly known as the K to 12 Law, has been implemented in the hope of creating massive school reform. This reform included a drastic shift in the basic education curriculum, vast organizational change, and massive hiring of teachers, among others. And in order to aid teachers through the transition in the curriculum, they were provided with various workshops and training. The downside of this training, however, was that teachers were only given one week to digest their learning. A week after that, they were sent back to their schools to don a new role. Hence, teachers were experiencing enormous pressure in meeting the new expectations of their roles.

The Philippine education system today

The K to 12 Law has brought about substantial reforms in the Philippine education system today. For decades, the Philippines has been the "last country in Asia and one of only three countries worldwide with a 10-year pre-university cycle (Angola and Djibouti are the other two)" ("K to 12 General Information | Department of

Education,” n.d., n.p.). This was changed in 2013, when the government approved into law the Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013. This law required the country’s education system to comprise the following:

At least one (1) year of kindergarten education, six (6) years of elementary education, and six (6) years of secondary education, in that sequence. Secondary education includes four (4) years of junior high school and two (2) years of senior high school education. (Aquino, 2013, p. 1)

Besides increasing the number of years in the basic education sector, the Department of Education also formulated a new curriculum design which aimed to enhance the global competitiveness of the Filipino graduates. Beginning from the kindergarten and the first three years of the primary education, the Mother Tongue- Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) will be used. This means that instructional materials and the mode of teaching will be localized. Teachers will be using the mother-tongue or the language first learned by the child as the medium of instruction. Many researchers, especially language experts, argue that the MTB-MLE is an effective way to help children transition their learning from Filipino to English, as their cognitive and reasoning skills are developed when they learn how to operate equally in different languages (Renomeron, 2014). In addition, they also find this effective in restoring and preserving the country’s native language. Difficulties arise, however, when some of the early childhood education teachers are not familiar with the children’s native language, and the books used for instruction are not in the children’s mother tongue. Currently, the MTB-MLE instructional materials are printed in only twelve languages, as they are the only languages recognized by the Department of Education. This is another drawback of this program, given the Philippines is home to a total of 182 native spoken languages (Collin, 2010).

Furthermore, the secondary education sector faces an equally challenging transition into the implementation of the new curriculum. Increasing to two more years in high school translates to an increased number of enrolments which requires more schools, more classrooms, more teachers, and more school leaders. In order to respond to this challenge, the Department of Education constructed more classrooms, hired more teachers, and invested a billion pesos more of the budget in the basic education sector (Department of Education, 2015). In addition, every school’s human resource was also improved by providing relevant content and pedagogy training to teachers and leadership skills enhancement for principals.

The Issue

The Philippines is currently undergoing a massive transition in its education system as it commits to transforming Filipino children into globally-competitive lifelong learners. The provision in the law to provide teachers and school leaders with the relevant and necessary training to help them deliver the expectations of the curriculum shows that the government understands their critical role in its success. While principals have indirect influence on students’ achievement, they have a crucial responsibility in helping teachers effectively perform in their roles. As Morrison and Cooper (2008) suggest, principals “exercise significant positional power and

influence” (p. 106) in helping teachers make lifelong commitment in improving their practice.

The state mandates all educators to participate in the in-service training and workshops for their professional development. However, these are traditional approaches, which have received many criticisms from educational researchers, as they tend to become costly, fragmented, brief, inconsistent, and disconnected from actual classroom practices (Chalmers & Keown, 2006; Schlager & Fusco, 2003; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). In my experience as a secondary school teacher in a public school, for example, most of our professional development activities required attendance outside the school. This entailed budget for my transportation and accommodation, which are rarely subsidized by the school. Additionally, these professional activities are, most of the time, in the forms of direct instruction of theoretical insights through seminars and workshops. As teachers, we are left with the responsibility of translating these theories into practice. As a result, teachers who have difficulty in translating new learning into their practice tend to go back to their old ways.

There has been an increasing interest in professional learning community (PLC) as an effective approach for teachers’ professional development. Unlike training, workshops, conferences and other means for teachers’ professional growth, many researchers claim that PLC creates conditions in schools that help teachers learn and grow professionally (DuFour, 2012; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2009). These conditions are creating a culture of collaboration, shared leadership, shared vision, and collective learning, among others.

In light of this, this study aimed to gather and explore the possibilities of the development of PLCs in the Philippines by looking through the views and perspectives of secondary school principals. In order to unravel these views and perspectives, this research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are secondary school principals’ perspectives about existing policies for teacher professional development in Philippine public schools?
2. How do secondary principals implement these policies in their schools to support the professional development of teachers?
3. How do principals view professional learning community (PLC) as an approach to support teachers’ professional development?
4. Have the secondary school principals established PLCs in their schools to facilitate teachers’ professional development?
5. If yes, what are specific steps secondary school principals have undertaken in facilitating PLCs? If no, what are the constraints and affordances they perceive in developing PLCs in their schools?

The Significance Of The Study

The study aims to contribute in the growing area of research exploring the concept of professional learning communities as an approach to teachers’ professional development in schools. Specifically, this may help secondary school principals view professional development from a different angle. It is the intention of the study to open their eyes to seeing new and exciting opportunities to help their teachers grow

and develop professionally.

In addition, the findings of the study could make an important contribution to the policy makers for training and professional development of teachers in the Philippines. It is for the reason that to date, there has been a paucity of current research literature that explores the views of principals in the development of PLCs in the country. The study is the first of its kind, as previously published studies on teacher professional development have not tackled PLCs using the context of the Philippines. Furthermore, this research will be beneficial for teachers, as the development of PLCs in schools would entail having a staunch support system for them. The very presence of PLCs in schools will make teachers feel valued, appreciated, and supported as they strive to effectively improve the quality of learning in their classrooms.

Finally, and most importantly, the study may indirectly benefit students, as it aims to help improve the conditions of teaching through the formation of PLCs at school level. It is understood that when teachers feel valued and supported in their work place, they are more likely to be motivated to better perform their roles.

The Context

The Philippines is an island country located in the South East Asian region. It is an archipelago that consists of 7,107 islands. This archipelago is divided into three major island groups, which are Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The country's capital city is Manila, which is located in the central part of Luzon. Besides the three major island groups, there are also many smaller islands that have their unique characteristics, languages, religion, and culture. The Philippines is a tropical country, which means it only has two seasons—wet or dry.

The dry season is from January to May, while wet season is from June to December. During the wet season, the winter monsoon triggers monsoon rains that normally carry strong winds and higher sea levels. The Philippines sits inside the typhoon belt; hence it suffers annual onslaught of heavy and dangerous storms from the months of July through December. It is not uncommon for public schools to suspend classes for a couple of days or weeks depending on the expanse of the typhoons' devastation. These natural calamities and disasters are threats to the people's well-being, as it derails socioeconomic progress and requires complex recovery interventions (Frankenberg, Sikoki, Sumantri, Suriastini, & Thomas, 2013). For example, in November 2013, the Eastern Visayas region was badly hit by typhoon Haiyan. Haiyan was one of the strongest typhoons ever recorded to hit land (Lum & Margesson, 2014). It damaged 2500 public schools and destroyed 12, 400 classrooms ("Two years after Typhoon Haiyan, the school rebuilding goes on," 2015).

In particular, this research takes place in Masbate, the southernmost island province in Luzon. Masbate is administratively part of the Bicol region. However, because of its proximity to Visayas (the second major group of islands in the Philippines), Masbate shares common biogeographic and sociolinguistic features with the people of Visayas. Similar to other islands in the rest of the country, Masbate's topography ranges from hilly to mountainous in the upland areas, with narrow coastal plains in the lowland areas. These topographical features strongly impact on the delivery of essential

educational services to the people (Aruhu, 2010; Bosamata, 2011).

The province of Masbate comprises 20 municipalities and one city. These twenty municipalities have 565 public elementary schools and 115 public secondary schools as of 2016 (DepEd Masbate Province, 2016). All of these schools in these municipalities are under the authority of the Masbate province division. On the other hand, the city division of Masbate has 34 public elementary schools and 8 public secondary schools (DepEd Masbate City, 2016).

The Research Paradigm

The study draws on the foundations of interpretive paradigm. It is founded in the researcher's belief that "society does not exist in an objective, observable form; rather, it is experienced subjectively because individuals give it meaning by the way they behave" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 6). People make deliberate choices and these choices are strongly influenced by how they perceive their current realities. The reality is socially constructed (Rowlands, 2005), and while facts about behavior may be established, those are always context-bound and do not necessarily apply to everyone and every time (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, understanding these realities necessitates holistic views and the use of an interpretive paradigm that acknowledges the "intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being explored, and the situational constraints shaping the process" (Rowlands, 2005, p. 81).

The researcher's theoretical lens depends on what the researcher wants to know in conducting the research. That is, what one wants to know determines how one should go about it (Trauth, 2002). Essentially, the aim of this research is to understand the lived experiences of the principal participants with the current policies on professional development of teachers. Gaining understanding of the principals' lived experiences will help the researcher build theories around the possibilities of the development of PLCs in the schools where these principals work. The association with the principals' lived experiences and understanding in order to shape theories that will guide the research is called the interpretive paradigm. This is how the interpretive paradigm operates: "the researcher works directly with experience and understanding to build theory on them" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 22).

In addition, employing an interpretive paradigm in a research work requires discipline. The researcher must also be patient, honest, courageous, persistent, imaginative, sympathetic, reflective, and have the view of conducting research with people to learn with them and not to conduct research on them (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This is parallel to what Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) point out what interpretive researchers must not do, and that is bring their own hypothesis, concepts, or ideas in the field to test them. Rather, they enter the field to understand how these ideas and concepts are used and let the hypothesis itself "emerge from the field" (p. 18). Hence, this necessitates the interpretive researcher to employ a data generation method that allows her or him to become part of the research setting (Burton et al., 2008).

The Participants

The participants in the study are all principals in their respective schools. Individual semi-structured interviews are carried out in each school. Three among the five participants are female and two are male. In total, there are five principals who participated in the individual interview. Two of the principals had at least five years of experience as a school leader, while the other three had more than twenty years of experience in a school leadership position. Engaging with these principals with varied years of experience in school leadership service is an opportunity to gather a rich amount of data regarding their diverse professional development experience.

The Data Generation Methods

The researcher in qualitative research could either employ interactive or non-interactive data generation methods. Interactive techniques require the researcher to interact with the subjects being studied, such as conducting an interview, while non-interactive techniques lack such interaction, as in review of documents (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). In the study, the researcher intends to engage in both techniques of generating data by doing interviews and document analysis.

The Interviews

Interviews are one of the most popular methods in generating qualitative data. Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin and Lowden (2011) point out that this popularity is due to its flexibility. They argue that:

Interviews are one of a range of methods intended to gather information that is illuminative and goes beyond the descriptive in order to help us understand why people think or act in certain ways to help explain why something has or has not worked. (Menter et al., 2011, p. 126)

This is one of the primary reasons why the interview is the most suitable approach for the study. In this approach, the researcher has the opportunity to go beyond the surface level of the participant's response and use probing questions to explore deeper into their perceptions and views. Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen and Walker (2014) point out that this is especially true, because interviews are the main tools used by researchers to "gather data from people about opinions, beliefs, and feelings about situations in their own words" (p. 466). Through interviews, researchers can better understand the respondents' experiences and how they interpret those experiences.

In its simplest definition, an interview is a conversation between two individuals; one is asking the question, or is also known as the interviewer, and the other one responds to the question, or is also called the interviewee (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Interview, however, is not just an ordinary conversation, because it has to be purposive, question-based, and there is the expectation that the responses of the interviewee are as explicit and as detailed as possible (Cohen et al., 2007). When it comes to qualitative interviewing, Punch and Oancea (2014) argue that the conversation is more focused on grasping the meaning and building knowledge together.

Many researchers claim that using interviews as research methods has numerous advantages. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) emphasize one distinct strength of interviews is its ability to yield information that directly answers the research questions. It is aforementioned that one benefit of using interviews is that it provides flexibility to the researchers, where they can probe and follow up on the interviewee's answers in order to yield deeper information. In a like manner, interviewees can also ask for clarification from the interviewer if they do not understand the question. This way, the researcher is able to gather more accurate information from the interviewees (Menter et al., 2011). On the contrary, the flexibility of interviews could also be disadvantageous for the researcher. "Interviewers' flexibility in sequencing or wording questions can result in substantially different responses, thus reducing the comparability of responses" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 353). Another weakness of using interviews to generate data is that it is time-consuming and expensive (Menter et al., 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Besides the researcher needing to adjust to the availability of the respondents, it also takes time and resources when the researcher begins the data analysis. Lastly, Yin (2013) cites that one of the dangers of employing interviews is the tendency for participants to only provide information that they think the researcher wants to hear, or to put themselves in a good light, instead of providing the accurate information. To avoid this, the researcher must have a "good background of information, to follow up with questions that reflect knowledge of a different interpretation, and, if all else fails, to triangulate response through other interviews or document reviews" (Newby, 2010, p. 342).

Moreover, interviews come in various types. Menter et al. (2011) cite three main types of interviews: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. In a structured interview, respondents are asked a consistent set of questions, like that of a questionnaire (Conrad & Serlin, 2011; Menter et al., 2011). The unstructured interview, on the other hand, has no predefined set of questions resulting in informal conversations with the respondents (Cohen et al., 2007). In the study, the semi-structured interview is employed to still be able to engage respondents in a conversation while ensuring that it is kept systematic.

Conclusion

The study examined the roles and perspectives of secondary school principals in the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) in the Philippines. It specifically investigated the approaches of secondary school principals to the formation of PLCs in their schools. The underlying assumption was that principals' understanding of their roles in the implementation of existing teacher professional development policies from the Department of Education is central to the successful formation of PLCs. It is in this light that the first and second research questions were aimed at exploring the perceptions of the principals about the existing professional development (PD) policies for teachers, and their approach to implementing them.

While the participants have provided rich insights towards the research questions, it cannot be overlooked that a limitation of the study lies in the relatively small sample size. As mentioned earlier in the third chapter, purposive sampling was used so that the data generated by the study would be reflective of the diversity of backgrounds of the schools where these principals came from, and be of benefit to a diverse audience. Despite this intention, the small sample size did not allow the generation of a more

holistic view of the experiences of the principals, as they represented only a minute number of the general school population in Masbate. A larger number of participants—that perhaps included head teachers and classroom teachers—could potentially have provided a wide range of professional development experiences that would have resulted in more inclusive findings.

To some extent, the study was also limited by the lack of information on PLCs in the Philippines. This was evident in principals' limited understanding on how PLCs operate. Such limited understanding also became one of the challenges encountered by the researcher during the field interviews. Lastly, the study did not employ multiple interactive data collection methods. The use of these could have provided a more effective approach to capturing data on a larger, deeper and richer scale from the participants. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study has proved effective and successful in providing significant insights into the experiences of principals in the development of, and approaches to PLCs in the Philippines.

The most obvious finding to emerge from the study was the lack of continuing professional development programs for teachers in the Philippines. It has been shown in the findings that there were a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the principals in the study identified that the overwhelming school responsibilities, strong respect for hierarchical authority, and insufficient pre-service education of teachers were the major barriers that made it difficult for them to introduce and implement professional development programs for teachers. These findings were drawn from the experiences of the principals as they implemented the Results-based Performance Management System (RPMS) and the National Competency-based Teacher Standards (NCBTS), the two-main teacher professional development policies for public schools. Secondly, despite having a wide range of professional development activities available for teachers, the nature of these opportunities is still the same traditional directed instruction, which has been hugely criticized in the education literature. This suggests that in spite of the many policies aimed at teacher professional development reform, the idea of Timperley et al. (2007) still holds true—that the problem does not lie in the type of programs or activities teachers engage in but in the content of these activities that would lead and motivate teachers to change their current practices.

The second major finding was the lack of continuing professional development programs. This suggests that the principals in the study are not able to establish PLCs in their schools. Nonetheless, the principals shared significant insights into what counted as important factors that would help in the creation of PLCs, and what they believed would be the potential barriers that they might face upon creation of these communities. It emerged from the findings that having a culture of collaboration in a school and a staff's openness to change are two significant characteristics that support the formation of PLCs. These are attributes which principals considered to be most effective in engaging teachers in continuing professional development. The principals believed that being open to change would make it easier for teachers to embrace changes in the teacher professional development framework of the school.

It can be argued too that this research has shown that the culture of collaboration, as demonstrated by teachers, is connected to the unique Filipino culture of 'Bayanihan'. The 'Bayanihan' is an invaluable aspect of Filipino culture where people are always ready to help carry each other's burden. This spirit of collegiality exemplifies the

collaborative relationship that is present in PLCs. The implication of this for schools in the Philippines is that the willingness of teachers to help each other could be a driving force for the successful formation of PLCs in the country.

In spite of the abovementioned factors that may contribute to the formation of PLCs in their schools, the principals identified a number of barriers which they claim are deterrents. The absence of concrete policy guidelines and limited school funding were articulated as two major concerns. The findings have shown that principals' strong respect for hierarchical authority instigated their reluctance to establish learning teams within their schools. This finding may have a strong implication in relation to the level of confidence of the principals in their leadership. Moreover, limited school funding was also viewed as a barrier to the formation of PLCs, because the principals anticipated that establishing professional learning teams would require human and physical resources, which are costly. The new Learning Action Cell (LAC) policy reinforces this, as it requires principals to use their existing school funding or to generate external grants in order to sustain the activities related to the formation of LACs. This may be problematic, as incorporating LAC expenses into the existing operational expenses of the schools may increase the principals' stress level at the work place.

Finally, the findings of the study also reinforced the idea that effective leadership style is a key to the successful formation of PLCs or to support teachers in pursuing continuous growth and development in their professional career. The findings suggest that these effective leadership styles are role modelling, collaborative leadership, ethical leadership, and good management skills. Although it cannot be argued that top-down leadership predominantly exists in school organizations involved in the study, it was found that it served a good purpose, as teachers and the other school staff looked up to their leaders as role models. The downside of this, however, is that some principals considered strong culture of hierarchy in the organization as an obstruction to the promotion of culture of collaboration inside the school. This highlights the importance of a leadership style that recognizes teachers as leaders of their own learning. In addition, the study has raised an important question about the nature of ethical leadership—that advancing a school's common good also translates into creating teachers who are leaders of their own learning and who are aware that making themselves better is their moral and ethical responsibility. Lastly, a further and significant finding of the study is that when schools adopt PLCs, the leader must have a repertoire of strategies and management skills to be able to respond to different school situations. Overall, this strengthens the idea that continuing professional development should not only be focused on teachers but more so on the development of school leaders.

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