# Developing School-based Gifted Curriculum Through Professional Learning Community: A Case Study of a Junior High School in Taipei

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## Abstract

It is increasingly acknowledged by researchers across the world that professional learning community is a good means of school improvement. The Taiwanese ministry of education and local authorities have been promoting the idea and practices among various levels of schooling since mid 2000s. Both school-based and cross-school professional learning communities are in practice in Taiwanese context. This study aims at offering a case study of a school-based professional learning community with 5 members in a junior high school in Taipei. Initiated and facilitated by the researcher, this professional learning community focuses on developing a school-based English Talent program for language gifted students. Taking the action research approach, all teachers have to implement this school-based curriculum. Members of this professional learning community are going to observe each other's lesson and then discuss how the teacher teach and how the students learn. With the findings from action research, this school-based curriculum will be revised to offer better learning for future gifted students. Data are collected from mid 2017 onwards. The experience of this professional learning community can offer an interesting case to international audience regarding the development of professional learning community in Taiwanese context. The Taiwanese case might serve as a start for future international comparative study.


Keywords: Professional Learning Community (PLC), school-based curriculum, talent program, case study

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Professional Learning Community (PLC) in Taiwan: opportunity and practice

Ministry of Education Taiwan (MOE, Taiwan) announced a new curriculum reform in 2014. The main purpose is to improve the quality of school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2014). It offers school more space to develop school-based curriculum so that students could have an opportunity to explore their multiple talents (Chang & Lee, 2014). However, developing school-based curriculum requires teachers' ability of curriculum design and development. In Taiwanese school settings, teachers working in different school level seldom have the opportunity to do curriculum development. Most in-service teachers use textbook and follow the national curriculum in their daily routine. It is not compulsory for in-service teachers to develop curriculum in previous national curriculum such as the Grade 1-to-9 Integrated Curriculum. In other words, the proficiency of developing a curriculum among in-service teachers is insufficient.

To achieve the goal of developing school-based curriculum, how to empower in-service teachers becomes a priority (Chang & Lee, 2014). Therefore, teacher professional development (TPD) becomes a key factor to enhance the ability of curriculum development among in-service teachers. Professional learning communities (PLC) is regarded as an effective strategy for school and teacher improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Sun, 2010). Therefore, MOE Taiwan applies PLC as a major means to empower teachers and improve school (Ministry of Education, 2009).

As in other Asian countries, PLC becomes a popular form of professional development. There are, at least, two forms of PLCs in Taiwan. One is school-based PLC and the other cross-schools. MOE Taiwan and local authorities encourage in-service teachers to form PLC and provide various incentives such as a small amount of money for PLC to purchase stationary, books or invite speakers to share. In Taiwan, successful PLCs are usually on a voluntary and cross-schools basis and as a bottom-up practice.

## 1.2 Aim of this study

As aforementioned, PLC is a popular form of empowering teachers to develop curriculum in Taiwanese context. Meanwhile, those PLCs initiated by teachers are often more successful. In the past decade, there have been various research exploring PLC in Taiwanese context. However, the study focusing on the PLC of teachers working in the field of gifted education is rare. This study provides a case to explicate the PLC operation among five teachers developing a new curriculum for an English Talent Program (ETP) in a junior high school in Taipei. This particular PLC is initiated by the researcher who is in charge of the ETP.

In this study, following aspects are going to be explored:

1. The context of forming a PLC: What makes these teachers form this PLC?

2. The process of this PLC: How does the PLC operate? What roles do the members play during the process?

## 2. Methodological Remarks

Qualitative case study is applied for this study because, as Lichtman (2010) indicated, it provides an explicit and detailed research on a specific case. The data is from interviews with PLC participants and documents including the meeting minutes, curriculum plan and individual lesson plans. Interviews with four teachers in this PLC were conducted by the researcher. All 16 PLC meetings were recorded via digital recorder and key points were transcribed by the researcher after each meeting. The official PLC meeting was held, at least, once per month. Before the curriculum was put into practice, PLC members met more frequent to ensure the implementation was on the right track.

The PLC, as aforementioned, consists of five English teachers in a junior high school located at the center of Taipei City. This school (School X afterwards) is an average size in Taipei with about 1500 students and 120 teachers. School X is a comparative new school in Taipei. It was established in 2004 to reduce the big student population in this district. These five teachers are voluntary to form a PLC while the rest of 8 English teachers in the school are reluctant to develop curriculum. In other words, the motivation of PLC members is high. The details of participants are listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Backgrounds of PLC Participants**

| Teacher | Age | Qualification | Year in teaching profession | Gifted Education Qualification |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A* | 39 | TESOL (MA) from an overseas university | 14 | Yes |
| B | 46 | TESOL (MA) from an overseas university | 18 | No |
| C | 40 | TESOL (MA) from an overseas university | 15 | No |
| D | 35 | TESOL (BA) from a domestic university | 12 | No |
| E | 30 | Linguistics (MA) from a domestic university | 5 | No |

*Teacher A is the one who conducted this study.

## 3. The Operation of PLC: Context, Process and Outcomes

In this section, the context of forming this PLC is described and discussed firstly and followed by the operation of this PLC. In the last part of this section, the outcome of this PLC is discussed briefly.

## 3.1 The Context of ETP and the establishment of this PLC

In the case school, ETP has a developing trajectory. It started at 2005 that is the second year of the birth of School X. This is the mission given by the Department of Education in Taipei City government to the founding principal of School X. ETP has been the selling point of School X since then. In other words, ETP has a long history in School X. In the past, the curriculum of ETP was made by one enthusiastic English teacher, teacher H. Teacher H taught most of the lessons to students in ETP while other English teachers played less role in ETP. However, heavily replying on one teacher runs a huge risk for ETP in School X. In 2014, Teacher H moved to another junior high school in the southern part of Taiwan. The delivering of ETP lessons became an issue in School X. Other English teachers in School X were not able to take charge of ETP. As Teacher C mentioned in the interview, '*We are not familiar with how ETP is running so that no one in School X want to take over ETP*'.

When the researcher re-allocated to School X from previous school in 2014, the principal immediately asked the researcher to be the one in charge of ETP because none of the English teachers in School X wanted to do it. As a newcomer to School X, the researcher had to do it. It is described by Teacher B as follow:

> No one [English teacher] wanted to take over [ETP] because it was mainly developed by Teacher H in the past. … … You were the newbie in our school and that was the reason why the principal asked you to be the coordinator of ETP. She [the principal] could not force other English teachers to do it. You were new here so that you became an easy target. She knew that you could not say no to her.

The researcher has been in charge of ETP in school X since 2014. With the understanding of the history of ETP, it is obvious that this program should not be one individual English teacher's responsibility. More English teachers should get involved. Otherwise, if the researcher leaves School X someday like Teacher H, similar thing may happen in School X. From that time on, the researcher begins to search for better practice and solution to keep the ETP sustainable.

When the researcher learns about the practice of PLC, it might be a good means to enhance teachers' professionalism as well as develop ETP curriculum collectively. But, motivating English teachers in School X to form PLC is not an easy task. As Chen (2017) points out, Taiwanese school teachers 'do not have sufficient time' and 'lack strong drive' to do their professional learning community. The first move of establish a PLC is to offer incentive and trigger teachers' motivation.

Applying for government funding is one of the means to provide incentive. As aforementioned, promoting PLCs in schools is a policy of MOE Taiwan. There are several grants for school to apply. One of the grants is up to NT$ 100,000 per academic year. The researcher prepared the proposal for this grant and successfully secured it in 2017 and 2018. Part of the grant could be used to subside the PLC members. This could be a good incentive. It is like what Teacher E described:

> To join this PLC for ETP is partly because we are friends and partly because there is subside. I mean that we can have attendance fee. That makes me more

willing to show up for PLC meetings. Also, you [the researcher] prepare some snack and drinks for meetings. I feel more relaxing to attend this PLC.

In this case, attendance fee and a relaxing environment for discussion are incentive to Teacher E. Meanwhile, personal network also plays a role in this formation process. To sum up, the establishment of this PLC is based on attractive incentive and personal network while the relaxing environment also functions as a positive drive for the teachers to participate.

## 3.2 The Process of this PLC

In 12-month time, the PLC members met 16 times. Each meeting is about 3 to 4 hours. 13 out of the 16 meetings are with all members. The rest of three meetings are with 4 members. Teacher B were absent for one meeting and Teacher E missed two. The meetings usually took place in the staff meeting room or staff lounge. Regarding the participants and the meeting place of this PLC, it is clear that this PLC is school-based.

As mentioned previously, the researcher initiated this PLC and furthermore played the leading role within this PLC. As Teacher B described, '*the operation of this PLC is highly relying on Teacher A because she kept reminding each member of the meeting time and the tasks we need to complete*'. Teacher E also mentioned that '*Teacher A is the leader [of this PLC] and she assigned task to each of us*'. However, Teacher A did not have any power over the other four teachers or possess official curriculum leader's role. She is an English teacher as the other four teachers. Although Teacher A does not have an official appointment or duty, she fulfills the definition of 'a leader' or 'a curriculum leader/teacher leader'. Teacher A did have influence on other teachers and brought these teachers together to make some changes in School X's school-based curriculum.

In the first four meetings, PLC members were doing brainstorm to come out with some good ideas and directions to develop a new curriculum for ETP. However, the process was not smooth. On the contrary, there have been challenges. Some major challenges in the first four meetings are listed below:

1. PLC members do not have experience in developing curriculum from scratch.
2. PLC members do not have common language to do a good discussion.
3. PLC members need time to know each other well and built up mutual trust.

During the first two meetings, the discussion is quite dry due to the above-mentioned reasons. Teacher D even wanted to quit after the second meeting because she could not see the progress. To solve this issue, Teacher A approached Teacher B in private asking for his help during discussions. When Teacher A led the discussion, Teacher B made a proactive response. They played the role as pitcher and catcher in the PLC meetings. Gradually, other members started to expressed their thoughts and shared their ideas.

Moreover, Teacher A suggested that PLC members can look for ideas and directions from their previous works while showing members with examples of curriculum from other schools. With these examples and the calling on previous experience, the

discussion got increasingly focused and meaningful. But, coming out with ideas is one thing while realizing these ideas into a workable curriculum is another. After overcoming the first few challenges, this PLC faced another issue: who is going to write the lesson plans in accordance with the curriculum design? As Teacher C stated:

> I enjoyed the brainstorms and discussion. However, putting these ideas into real teaching is challenging. I bet all of us are reluctant to do it. … … I was thinking that I did not have the qualification of gifted education. Can I come out with the curriculum and lesson plans to those gifted students in the ETP? I have to admit that I am lack of confident in doing it.

The worries expressed by Teacher C demonstrated the essence of this challenge. Among five members, Teacher A is the only one with proper qualification in gifted education. After realizing the core of this issue, Teacher A prepared the first lesson plan based on the discussions and shared it with others. Moreover, she explained some of the key concepts in teaching those gifted students. In other words, Teacher A did a demonstration and offered empowerment to other teachers.

To sum up, there have been various challenges at different stages of this PLC and the developing process of a new curriculum. Lacking of confidence was a big challenge while developing the curriculum. It is a fact that Teacher A is the only one with proper training in teaching the gifted. Therefore, empowering the rest of PLC members became a must-do thing.

## 4. Concluding Remarks

This study is an ongoing one. The PLC is still active in School X although one member, Teacher B, took a no-pay leave for two years. But, the rest of the PLC still meet regularly to evaluate the implementation of this curriculum. Developing a new curriculum is a long process but with the support from each other in this PLC, it becomes easier. In this paper, the researcher illustrates the context of this school-based PLC and how it works. The developed curriculum is currently implemented in School X from September 2019 onwards. Some challenges are mentioned and solutions are briefly discussed. As the PLC is still in operation, more new curriculum plans might be developed in the future.

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