Professional learning community practices in high and low performing schools in Malaysia

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KEYWORDS	A B S T R A C T
Professional learning community; School with different achievement; Teacher professionalism	This study aims to investigate the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) practices in high and low performing schools. *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) questionnaire was utilised as the instrument of data collection and distributed to a total of 157 teachers who were randomly selected as respondents. Findings showed that the level of PLC practices in high and low performing schools was high. The t-test showed a significant difference for the level of PLC practice between high and low performing schools. However, there was no significant difference for the dimensions of 'shared personal practice'. The findings demonstrate that high performing schools practiced Professional Learning Community at a higher level than low performing school. As a conclusion, this study recommends that PLC should actively practice by teachers in schools in order to enhance their professionalism *vis a vis* schools performance.

Introduction

Centralisation of Malaysian education system had lead to a uniform characteristic of schools in the system pertaining to their curriculum, buildings design, teacher qualifications, and infrastructure. However, this uniformity did not produce a same level of performance among schools and becoming the main issue to be tackled. Thus, Education Quality Standard of Malaysia has been modified in the National Key Results Area (NKRA - for Education) – a Malaysian development plan 2010 - each school will be responsible to evaluate their own performance so as to know their main

strength and weaknesses for becoming excellent (Ministry of Education, 2010). In the standard, school performance will be assessed as a whole and not limited to academic achievement only. Scores that obtained from the assessment will categorize schools from band one to seven. Lower band refers to the high performing school while the high band refers to schools with low achievement.

Previous researcher believed that the performance of each school was influenced by the culture of their organization (Sharifah

Md Nor, 2000). School with teachers community that have high professionalism usually have a positive organizational culture and were categorized as good (Silins & Mulford, 2002). Teachers are the core components of organisation and key players of determining the success of explicit and implicit curriculum implementation (Awang Had Salleh, 1998). Thus, teachers cannot be a knowledge deliverer only but need to become an active learner and always make an effort to improve their teaching and learning (T & L) through teaching reflections, shared knowledge, brainstorming and knowledge culture, being a researcher and innovator. Once teachers dominated an important area, they grow to be professional students who engaged in inquiry, reflection practices, problem solving and leadership capacity. The increased skills and knowledge of teachers will lead to students improvement, which eventually led to the schools effectiveness (Silins & Fullan, 2002).

The enhancement of teachers learning process should be encourage along with the mission of education quality improvement in Malaysia in order to bridge the gap of achievement among schools. Previous studies shown that the practice of PLC have influence on the teachers professionalism and student achievement (Richardson, 2009; Dougherty, 2005; Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). However, does the knowledge sharing and PLC have the impact on the school performance in Malaysia. This small scale study is a preliminary study that aims to investigate the level of PLC practices between high and low performing schools in Malaysia.

Professional Learning Community

PLC plays an important role in promoting and sustaining learning of all professionals in school community to improve student learning (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005). PLC is an ongoing process in which teachers and administrators work together to find and share learning and act to the lessons, and strengthen the effectiveness of teachers as a professional for the benefit of students (Hord, 1997).

PLC is an important mediator for teachers to interpret as well as analyze student learning to facilitate the changes of their practices tailored to the needs of students (Lieberman, & Miller, 1999). Schools that adopt the successful PLC may be ready to adapt and respond to the new policy and changes (DuFour, 2004).

The effort of developing a learning community using existing expertise will be more efficient for the school would be able to identify the problems and needs of the teachers and students as well as the ability of the organization to change (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2002). The collaboration of teachers and administrators to find, share and apply of what they had learned from the community in turn will improve the level of their professionalism [(Hord, 1997)].

There are five dimensions of PLC (Hord, 1997a; Hord, 1997b) namely:

Shared and supportive leadership;
Shared values and vision;
Collective learning and application;
Supportive condition for relationship and structure;
Shared personal practice

Based on the previous findings, it can be concluded that the PLC can facilitate in improving student learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2007), school performance and student achievement (Hord, 1997a; Phillips, 2003) as well as being one of the best

alternative for teachers professional development [Saunders, Goldenberg & Gallimore, 2009).

Method

Participants

Data for this study was collected from 157 teachers from eight National Primary Schools in Penang, Malaysia. Four of the schools are high achieving schools that categorised in band 1 and 2 whereas the other four schools are categorised as low achieving schools that rank as band 6 and 7. The school ranking is according to Education Standard Quality of Malaysia by Ministry of Education Malaysia.

Instrument

The *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) questionnaire (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003) was employed in this study. The questionnaire that consisted with 56 items was combining four Likerts scale in measuring five dimensions of PLC i.e. shared and supportive leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and application; supportive condition for relationship and structure and; shared personal practice.

Results

The data were analyzed using the descriptive statistics i.e. mean and standard deviation to measure the level of practice, while t-test was employed to measure the significant differences between high and low performance schools in practicing PLC. The mean scores guideline was used to categorize the level of practices (Eke, 2011). The mean value of 1.00 to 2.50 were categorised as low level of practice while the mean value of 2.51 to 4.00 were referred

as high level of practice. The findings are given in Tables 1 and 2.

According to Table 1, the findings showed that the mean of PLC for high and low performing schools are 3.20 (std=0.44) and 3.05 (std=0.33) accordingly. Both of these mean values show both groups of schools had practiced PLC at a high level but a bit higher in high performing schools. However, the mean values for the dimensions of PLC showed that the dimension "shared and supportive leadership" practiced at the lower level than other dimensions with mean value of 3.13 (std=0.55) in high performing schools and 2.98 (std=0.41) in low performing schools.

Meanwhile, the t-test value in Table 2 shows that there is significant difference in level of PLC practice between high and low performing schools with the value of t = 2.49, p = .01. However, in the t-test for each dimension of PLC, the t value showed that there is no significant difference for the dimensions of 'sharing personal practice' between the two groups of the schools with the value of t = 1.67, p = .09.

Discussion and implications

The findings of this study indicate the level of PLC practice is high with the mean value for that high school 3.20 (std = 0.44) and 3.05 (std = 0.33) for high and low performing schools accordingly. In addition, the mean value for each dimension indicates that the highest dimension practiced is 'collective learning and applications' is, while the 'shared personal practice' is the lowest dimension practised in both types of schools. These findings are consistent with the previous studies that found the same results (Blacklocke, 2009).

Table.1 Level of PLC Practice of High and Low Performing Schools

Dimension	High Achieving Schools		Low Achieving Schools	
	Mean	*std*	*Mean*	*std*
1. Shared and supportive leadership	3.13	0.55	2.98	0.41
2. Shared values and vision	3.24	0.50	3.07	0.35
3. Collective learning and application	3.26	0.45	3.12	0.44
4. Shared personal practise	3.25	0.51	3.12	0.45
5. Support condition for relationship and structure	3.18	0.45	3.01	0.36
Professional Learning Community	**3.20**	**0.44**	**3.05**	**0.33**

Table.2 The Differences of PLC Practices Level Between High and Low Performing Schools

Dimensions of Professional Learning Community	t value	Sig
1. Shared and supportive leadership	1.99	.04*
2. Shared values and vision	2.46	.01*
3. Collective learning and application	2.08	.04*
4. Shared personal practise	1.67	.09
5. Support condition for relationship and structure	2.61	.01*
Professional Learning Community	**2.49**	**.01***

* significant value $p<.05$

The practice of collective learning and application are be a great way to enhance learning among teachers (Blacklocke, 2009). In spite of teamwork in PLC, teachers can learn from each other (Schmoker, 2006). A robust PLC promotes a strong professional learning individually and collectively in an open culture, mutual trust, respect and support (Bolam et al., 2005). Besides, the collective learning is the 'heart and soul' that contribute to the quality of teaching and learning (Hord & Hirsh, 2008).

In addition, the t-test value in this study showed a significant difference for the PLC practice between high and low performing schools. Meanwhile, for PLC dimensions, the t-test value showed significant differences for all dimensions except for the dimensions of 'sharing personal practice'.

As mentioned by previous study, the shared personal practice was practised at the low level though the level of PLC practise was high (Elmore, 2004). There is believe that this dimension tends to be the last dimension to developed in PLC. The reason of why teachers were difficult to be more open is because previously teacher was directed to work alone in a single class, and usually they became autonomous more personal (Chan-Remka, 2007). Thus teachers tend to

be more personal on their task i.e. "my classroom", "my subject" and "my students" (Chan-Remka, 2007). Moreover, only a few schools had allowed teachers to share their thought collaboratively. Thus, PLC is one of the best medium to enhance teachers work collaboratively in order to produce the best and innovative teaching and learning for students and schools performance improvement.

Conclusion

Knowledge sharing among teachers encourages teachers work collaboratively and learns from each other. Although this study does not investigate the direct relationship between PLC and school achievement, the findings in this study suggests that school with high performance has a higher level of PLC practices compare to low performing schools. Thus, this study recommends that every school should practice the PLC effectively in order to enhance teachers' professionalism as well as to improve the school performance.

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