

A Review of Related Literature of PLCs from Hermeneutics Perspectives

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Abstract

The studies of teacher learning and professional learning communities have arisen and received considerable attention in recent decades. Some researchers argue that the institutional and cultural contexts should be taken into consideration when examining issues related to PLCs. Being an approach which takes a systematic and critical reflection on the content of the written text, this study adopts the hermeneutics to disclose the conceptions as well as the characteristics of PLCs from different perspectives of both western and the Chinese scholars. Although there is no universal accepted definition of PLCs, it is found that developing PLCs involves building shared vision and broadening organizational, personal and interpersonal capacities within the learning organizations.

Keywords

Professional Learning Community, Hermeneutics

1. Introduction

It has been identified that the implementation and development of professional learning communities (PLCs) is attributed in the ongoing educational reforms globally (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000), since the educational reforms have been directed towards teaching performance as well learning outcomes (Wong, 2010a).

Teachers are regarded as “the agents of change for student development and school improvement” (Ho, Lee, & Teng, 2016: p. 33). They need to “continually enhance their professional knowledge in teaching in order to improve students’ learning outcomes” (Wong, 2010b: p. 623). DuFour (2004) states that “the best staff development happens in the workplace rather than in a workshop” (p. 63). Furthermore, previous literature demonstrates that teachers tend to be more

autonomous, confident, enthusiastic, collaborative and committed when being involved in learning communities (Earley and Porritt, 2010). In particular, fostering teacher development needs the establishment of teachers' PLCs since teachers are given more autonomy in taking instructional initiatives (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1998). On the other hand, it is identified that student would obtain academic progress when teachers work collaboratively (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004; Hargreaves et al., 2013). Furthermore, it is noted that "students' educational experiences depends most of all on the quality of teachers" (Wood, 2007: p. 281). Thus, there has been a call for a paradigm shift in learning organisations which put emphasis on professional development of teachers (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

2. Method

The humanities are "disciplines of knowledge which are broadly concerned with human thoughts, creative expressions and culture, and are classified as non-science academic disciplines" (Kundu, Nayar, & Shweta, 2011: pp. 1-2). In a word, being a method for interpreting the written texts of humanities, hermeneutics seems to be distinctive since it is an in-depth study which offers a unique capacity to approach the complexity of the texts and gain some insight into the "cultural contexts" (McCaffrey, Raffin-Bouchal, & Moules, 2012: p. 215).

Being an approach of humanities, hermeneutics is regarded as a "systematic and critical reflection" on the structured text (Hecke, 2011: p. 9). As Ricoeur (2001, as cited in Hecke, 2011) mentioned, the interpretation of the text includes not only "the linguistic phenomena", but also "the intended meaning" (p. 9). Rennie (2012) addressed that the researchers should "pay attention to familiar grammatical and syntactical arrangements and to the more or less determinate meanings of words" (p. 388). This means in hermeneutics, the features of language in which the text is written should be analysed in more details. As Gadamer (1992, as cited in Laverty, 2003: p. 25) explained, interpretation is a kind of "interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning of the text". As Ricoeur (2001, as cited in Hecke, 2011) states, "hermeneutical process lies in the 'technical' interpretation, in which the reader reaches the author's individual thoughts as they are laid out in the text" (p. 10). Thus, adopting hermeneutics to analyse the previous literature related to PLCs could provide some insight into the understanding how PLCs are defined and what are the characteristics of PLCs, which ultimately contributes to teachers' individual development.

3. Conceptions of PLCs

Many researchers indicate that there is no universal accepted definition of PLCs (e.g., Zheng et al., 2016). This terminology, PLCs, has various interpretations in different social-cultural contexts (Stoll et al., 2014; Wang, 2016). Thus, several terms have been used in connection with the concept of PLCs, such as "teacher

community, teachers and learning communities, critical friends groups, communities of practice” (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008: p. 82), “professional community (Louis et al., 1998), norms of collegiality, teachers’ collaboration with colleagues, learning community, and teacher networks (Lomos et al., 2011; Toole & Louis, 2002).

According to DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) statement, each word of the term, PLCs, were chosen purposefully. The followings will explicate the definition and comprehend for details from five aspects: 1) **Who** do the PLCs target at, 2) **Where** do PLCs happen, 3) **What** initiatives do PLCs involve, 4) **How** do PLCs develop, and 5) **Why** are PLCs being implemented?

“Who”

Broadly speaking, “all combinations of individuals with any interest in schools are now calling themselves PLCs” (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008: p. 82). It is a group of professionals (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2006; Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord, 2009; Kilbane Jr., 2009; Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016) who have shared vision for student learning (Kilbane Jr., 2009: p. 186). This group is regarded as “an inherently cooperative, cohesive and self-reflective” entity (Graves, 1992 as cited in Clausen, Aquino, & Widerman, 2009).

Narrow speaking, this group of educators involves administrators (Hamos et al., 2009), teachers (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016), sometimes school leaders (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011), or even whole schools or networked learning communities (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011).

“Where”

Researchers identify that PLCs mainly exist inside school settings (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Wong, 2010a). Specifically, PLCs are “operated at both the individual teacher level and the organizational school level” (Zhang & Pang, 2016: p. 12). Further, PLCs happen outside a school (Stoll et al., 2014). As Harris and Jones (2010) depict, PLCs are implemented between and across schools.

“What”

In PLCs, stakeholders are involved in a series collegial learning activities (Tam, 2015b: p. 426), such as collaborating, reflecting practice (Newmann, 1996 as cited in Kilbane Jr., 2009), sharing, interrogating (Newmann, 1996 as cited in Kilbane Jr., 2009; Little, 2002 as cited in Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008; Toole & Lewis, 2002 as cited in Bolam et al., 2005), joint planning (Brown and Isaacs, 1991 as cited in Huffman & Jacobson, 2003; DuFour et al., 2006), exchanging instructional practice (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll & Louis, 2007). In particular, these initiatives focus on “active teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection rather than abstract discussions” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995 as cited in Hadar & Brody, 2010).

“How”

It is put forward by Bolam et al. (2005) that the notion of community is the

focal point of PLCs. Researchers indicate that individuals in PLCs act and work together in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting (DuFour et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011; McREL, 2003 as cited in Penner-Williams, Díaz, & Worthen, 2017).

“Why”

Implementing PLCs mainly has three objectives. First, it aims at improving group members’ professional growth (Bolam et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2011), such as improving instructional practice and experience (Hamos et al., 2009; Hadar & Brody, 2010), learning deeply with colleagues about an identified topic, developing shared meaning, identifying shared purposes related to the topic (Hord, 2009), supporting innovation (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Second, it enhances students’ learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll & Louis, 2007 as cited in Ho, Lee, & Teng, 2016; Lee et al., 2011; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011). Third, it directs to prompting school development (Bolam et al., 2005; Zonoubi, Rasekh, & Tavakoli, 2017), building context and sustaining a culture of learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010 as cited in Ho, Lee, & Teng, 2016; Wong, 2010b).

In summary, PLCs are viewed as educational paradigm that aims at prompting teachers’ professional development, enhancing students’ learning and ultimately building and sustaining school improvement through individuals’ ongoing collaboration, sharing and inquiring within a school community.

4. Various Dimensions of PLCs

Breaking down the concept of PLCs into “clear and identifiable characteristics largely increase the usefulness of the study for practice and theory because it provides information about how specific elements of PLCs can be encouraged” (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016: p. 4).

Researchers have confirmed couples of characteristics of PLCs since 1990s. Tam (2015a) categorized these features into two categories which involve shared goal and learning activities. Meanwhile, some researchers conclude these traits with two groups according to the functions. One is regarded as the fundamental characteristic of PLCs, such as the shared vision and values (e.g., Zhang & Pang, 2016; Wells & Feun, 2007). The others function as the crucial components to the practice of PLCs which are related to collective learning and inquiry (e.g., Lindahl, 2011; Zhang & Pang, 2016). In addition, Wong (2010b) categorizes the elements of PLCs into three aspects: the future direction such as the shared goals and values; the process of professional learning, and the double-loop learning which demonstrates the relationships between goals and process. Further, Sleegers et al. (2013) describe the PLCs from three dimensions including organizational, personal, and interpersonal capacities. The following table (see Table 1) illustrates the research-based dimensions of PLCs presented by different researchers in chronological order.

Through integrating and synthesizing the above mentioned categories as well

Table 1. Dimensions of PLCs.

Researchers	Elements	
	Goals	Process
Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995	shared values & norms	collaboration; focus on learning; reflective dialogue; deprivatization of practice
Louis et al., 1996	shared values	collaboration; focus on student learning; reflective dialog; deprivatized practice
DuFour & Eaker, 1998	shared mission, vision & values	collaborative teams; collective inquiry; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; results orientation
Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Mason, 2003	shared values	a focus on student learning; reflective dialogue; action inquiry
Bolam et al., 2005	shared values & vision	collaboration focused on learning; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; reflective professional enquiry; mutual trust, respect and support; inclusive membership; openness, networks and partnerships; individual and collective professional learning
Vescio et al., 2008	a shared goal or vision	teachers' collaborative efforts and activities toward that goal; supportive conditions including physical, structural and human capacities
Hord, 2009	shared beliefs, values, & a vision	collective learning; peers sharing; supportive structural conditions; shared and supportive leadership; supportive relational conditions
Researchers	Elements	
	Goals of PLCs	Process of developing and sustaining PLCs
Harris & Jones, 2010	shared vision or sense of purpose	possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base; the norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement; respect and trust among colleagues at the school and network level; supportive leadership and shared leadership practices; a norm of involvement in decision-making; collegial relationships among teachers; a focus upon impact and outcomes for learners
Wong, 2010b	shared goals & values	collective inquiry; shared personal practice; action experimentation; collaborative culture; double-loop learning
Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011	shared belief	administrative responsiveness; teachers' influence in decision-making; the allocation of collaboration time; encouragement of innovation
Lindahl, 2011	shared expectations, a common mission & goals, a shared value system	peer collaboration; collective and reflective dialogue; shared practice and peer observations; a climate of trust; shared culture and adult accountability; widespread leadership
Song, 2012	a shared sense of purpose & focus	collaborative activity; support and cooperation; shared decision making
Stoll et al., 2014	shared values & vision	collaboration; collective responsibility; reflective professional enquiry; group, as well as individual, learning
Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016		collaborative learning capacity; a culture of sharing; Leadership for teacher learning; mutual understanding and support; continuous professional development; student-focused orientation
Vanblaere & Devos, 2016	shared values & vision	collective responsibility
Zhang & Pang, 2016	shared vision & values	collective learning and inquiry; shared personal practice; shared and supportive leadership

as the important elements presented by the researchers (see **Table 1**), the followings will summarize the characteristics of PLCs in terms of the goals of PLCs, and the process of developing and sustaining PLCs which involves building or-

ganizational capacity, personal capacity and interpersonal capacity.

Concerning the goals of PLCs, shared values and vision of learning and teaching are identified as the important and fundamental characteristic of PLCs by many scholars (e.g., Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Wells & Feun 2007; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Wong, 2010b). Further, some researchers presented similar descriptions as shared mission (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), shared beliefs (Hord, 2009; Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011), shared expectations (Lindahl, 2011), or shared norms (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995) for student learning. These characteristics provide the basis for developing consensus, ethical decision-making and commitment among stakeholders of a community (Kruse et al., 1995; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Wong, 2010b). As Louis and Kruse (1995) stated, a core characteristic of the professional learning community is an unwavering focus on student learning. Importantly, it is noted that these values and missions are “not static but are constantly reshaped by interaction among members” (Wong, 2010b: p. 624).

Regarding the process of developing and sustaining PLCs, it will be introduced from three dimensions, organizational, personal and interpersonal capacities.

First, organizational capacity involves supportive structural conditions, such as time, resources, place, system (Sleegers et al., 2013; Hord, 2009). It also includes supportive relational conditions as respect, mutual trust, support, openness, a culture of sharing, networks, and collegial relationships (e.g., Bolam et al., 2005; Harris & Jones, 2010; Lindahl, 2011; Hord, 2009; Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016; Vescio et al., 2008). Moreover, organizational capacity contains shared, widespread and supportive leadership (Hord, 2009; Lindahl, 2011; Zhang & Pang, 2016), which refers to “the effectiveness of school leadership at different levels in promoting teacher learning” such as principals encourage teachers to continue professional development, to make collective enquiry, or to provide staff training program (Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016: p. 239).

Second, personal capacity mainly involves teachers’ active learning and reflective learning (Sleegers et al., 2013), such as student-focused orientation which refers to teachers’ responsibility and competency in enhancing student learning (Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016: p. 238). As described by Vanblaere & Devos (2016), the personal capacity implies “examining and adapting teachers’ cognitive structures and theories” (p. 27). DuFour (2004) highlighted the importance of professional learning as a key component in creating PLCs (Ho, Lee, & Teng, 2016: p. 33 as cited in Fulton & Britton, 2011: p. 11). Teacher learning is viewed as one of the core characteristics of a PLC (Song, 2012: p. 91).

Besides individual learning, it also involves group learning. As for the interpersonal capacity in PLCs, it encompasses behavioural elements as collaboration focused on learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Sleegers et al., 2013; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995), reflective professional enquiry and dialogue (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Louis et al., 1996; Mason, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Song, 2012), deprivatization of practice (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Louis et al., 1996; Song, 2012; Zhang & Pang, 2016) and action experimentation (Wong, 2010b; DuFour

& Eaker, 1998). Specifically, the collaborative learning refers to teachers' collaborative initiatives of learning from each other, discussing with instructional strategies, or sharing ideas about teaching (Pang, Wang, & Leung, 2016). The reflective dialog or the collective inquiry means teachers' engagement in professional and reflective dialogues with focus on improving teaching practice and ultimately improve student learning outcomes (Kruse et al., 1995; Wong, 2010b). As for the deprivatization of practice, it aims at encouraging peer observation with the purpose of giving and receiving feedback on teaching (Zonoubi, Rasekn, & Tavakoli, 2017). In addition, it is noted that collective responsibility for student learning also falls into this mention (Bolam et al., 2005; Song, 2012; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Particularly, collective responsibility is central to PLCs (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016: p. 8).

In summary, aforementioned characteristics of PLCs are characterized by a culture of collaboration which aims at promoting organizational development. Importantly, it should be noted that these aforementioned features are intertwined and do not exist in isolation (Clausen, Aquino, & Widerman, 2009).

5. Conclusion

This exploratory article mainly draws on multiple lenses relating to the concepts of PLCs from two dimensions, namely, the conceptions of PLCs and the characteristics of PLCs. It could be affirmed that there is no unified definition for PLCs although there are various sorts of descriptions. In particular, the definitions of PLCs can be explicated from five aspects: 1) *Who* do the PLCs target at, 2) *Where* do PLCs happen, 3) *What* initiatives do PLCs involve, 4) *How* do PLCs develop, and 5) *Why* are PLCs being implemented? Concerning the establishment of PLCs, it is noted that the goal of PLCs includes building shared values and vision of learning and teaching. Particularly, developing and sustaining PLCs require building up organizational capacity to provide supportive conditions within the learning organisations, strengthening personal capacity to promote teachers' active learning and reflective learning, and broadening interpersonal capacities to enhance teachers' continual professional development, which ultimately benefits school improvement. The results are expected to provide valuable insights for teachers and school management.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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