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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY'S PRACTICES: EXPLORING MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the professional learning community strategies practiced by primary school teachers. This qualitative study used a multiphase case study design through interview and observation approaches. This study involved 15 teachers employed at eight selected primary schools. In addition, researchers also conducted a few observation sessions with the school administrators, teachers, and students within the schools. Findings indicated the studied primary teachers had accomplished four to five major strategies in implementing dimensions listed in Hord (1997)'s professional learning community's model. In summary, professional learning community has been practiced by teachers in the Southern Zone of Malaysia to improve the quality of teaching and learning and in turn improve the academic performance of students.

Keywords: Professional Learning Community, Strategy, Primary School, Malaysia



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INTRODUCTION

Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a new term among educators in Malaysia. However, at the international level, PLC has been much debated among educators as well as society (DuFour, 2016). PLC is defined as the collaborative effort of teachers committed to working in a team to improve the quality of teaching and learning (T&L) process such as conducting action research to produce an intervention that positively impacts the quality of student learning and improves their academic achievement (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Stoll et al. (2006) defined PLC as a group of people who share and evaluate the practice of the T&L process in a continuous, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, and learning-oriented manner with the aim of improving a teacher's effectiveness as a professional worker as well as student academic achievement. Hawley and Rollie (2007) also defined PLC as a community that is highly committed in terms of student learning and the T&L process. Hord (1997a) described PLC as a community that consistently acts for school improvement through various forms of study and discussion. Whereas for Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996), PLC is a school-based organizational structure in which there is an intellectually oriented culture.

PLC provides a variety of benefits to schools. First, it has been proven that PLC is able to make the T&L process more dynamic and quality or in other words schools that have good T&L must be having PLC in practice (Stoll & Loius, 2007; Wenger, 2000). There is so much evidence from previous studies that shows a student's academic achievement can be improved if the teacher runs PLC consistently (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). This statement is also agreed by Hofman and Dijkstra (2010) and Schechter (2008) who explained that school development and improvement of student academic achievement have a positive relationship to PLC practice among teachers.

The second advantage is that PLCs can develop a positive and dynamic school culture (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). There are many literature reviews supporting the idea and perception that PLC can improve student's academic achievement as well as stimulating the development of professionalism among teachers (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Senge, 1990). PLCs also focus on teachers' collective efforts towards student's learning as well as teacher development themselves, and this has been well received by government policymakers, researchers and even leadership practitioners around the world (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). According to Darling-Hammond (2000) and Harris and Sass (2011), student's academic achievement is related to the quality of teacher teaching while effective PLC is recognized as one of the ways to improve the quality of teacher teaching and thus contribute to sustainable student learning progress (Harris & Jones, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008).

PROBLEM BACKGROUND

The implementation of PLC also has various challenges and criticisms. According to Stoll and Loius (2007), the implementation of PLCs in China faces challenges in creating a school climate that supports the development of PLCs. This statement is in line with Bolam et al. (2005) who described the difficulty in implementing PLC which is to promote and maintain a learning culture in school with the goal of improving the quality of student learning. Giles and Hargreaves (2006) in their study of PLCs found that there is ample evidence stating that effective PLCs can increase teacher commitment and reflective practice among them (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Larrivee, 2000; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Yet to produce an effective PLC is difficult as it fails to be sustained over a long period of time. Another challenge in maintaining PLC is to cultivate "social capital" to accept this PLC culture and ensure that it continues to be practiced in schools. Social capital means a network of human relationships living or working in a particular society that allows the society to function effectively (Stoll & Loius, 2007; Ting, 2015). So, in the context of schools, social capital refers to school leaders, senior assistant teachers, panel heads, teachers, and students.

Next, a study conducted by Sims and Penny (2014) found four factors that lead to the failure in implementing PLC.



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First, PLC participants (teachers) made the PLC too rigid by focusing only on a set of matrix forms provided in the "data team" discussion, lack of time to collaborate and lack of support from administrators to make the PLC effective. The second factor was that most participants felt that PLCs did not have a positive impact on their teaching skills. In the interviews conducted, all six participants said that PLC did not directly influence their lesson planning. Third, was the lack of time. Time was seen as a major challenge to PLC implementation. Teachers found it difficult to sit together and discuss. Time constraint was a factor in their failure to collaborate because of the diverse work demands. Regarding to this issue, Voulalas and Sharpe (2005) also pointed out that there were various significant barriers to maintaining the implementation of PLC over a long period of time in a school. Such barriers were lack of time, lack of effective leadership, limited resources, and lack of long-term planning. The study also found that the leadership of school leaders is one of the most important elements in overcoming all these barriers because of their ability and power to manage resources well and influence the culture of the organization. The fourth factor was that the positive impact of PLC on student's academic achievement is debatable. Based on the study, only one in six participants agreed PLC had a positive impact on its students. While two other participants said no, and the rest remained silent. In addition, all participants negatively viewed the establishment of "data team" which refers to the PLC group in the schools studied. They also said that there was time constraint to complete the task given by the "data team" and was a challenge that had to be faced. However, there was one success gained because of the implementation of this PLC that it could create a collaborative culture in school.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to explore the implementation strategies of professional learning community practices among teachers in three states in the Southern Zone of Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Hord (1997a, 1997b) outlines five dimensions to describe an effective PLC. The five dimensions are the shared vision and mission; leadership sharing and supportive leadership; collective learning and learning application; personal practice sharing; and organizational support. Figure 2.6 shows the dimensions of the Professional Learning Community Model by Hord (1997a).

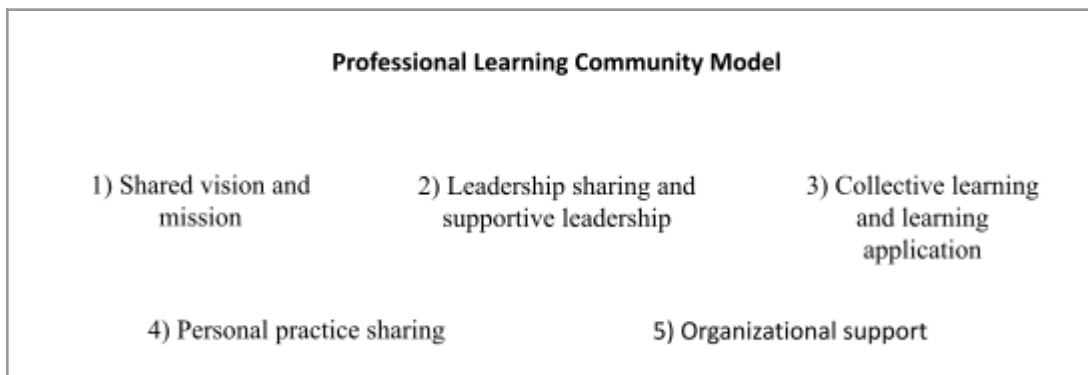


Figure 2.6 Professional Learning Community Model by Hord (1997a)

Strategies for Instructional Leadership Practices

Shared Vision and Mission



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According to Hord (1997a, 1997b) one of the main keys to the success of PLC in schools is shared vision and mission to maintain a culture of learning among leaders, teachers, and students. Based on this dimension, the element of belief needs to be learned by students while the element of value serves as a motivator for teachers to share a vision and mission to improve the quality of their students' learning (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). To further strengthen the PLC culture, teachers are also responsible for building value mechanisms that determine how they work or strive to achieve the vision and mission of a school. Reichstetter (2006) argues that the focus of the vision and mission is simply to improve student learning activities, and this should be done together. In addition to student learning, the school's vision and mission are also used as benchmarks in measuring the quality of teachers' teaching and its effectiveness on student learning. Thus, the construction of the vision and mission of the school needs to show the cooperation and collective responsibility of all parties in the school, and it should also focus fully on the learning process of students (Bolam et al., 2005; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Louis & Kruse, 1994). Feger and Arruda (2008) as well as Bolam et al. (2005) argue that the sharing of vision and mission is essential in the improvement of a school. This partnership means all communities whether inside or outside the school need to always be sensitive and help support each other to ensure the vision and mission is achieved. Through this dimension of partnership, administrators and teachers need to identify the needs and importance of a vision and mission rather than simply agreeing on whatever is a good idea for their school. They not only set a vision and mission together, but more than that they give full commitment in realizing it to improve the quality of student learning (Reichstetter, 2006).

Leadership Sharing and Supportive Leadership

The second dimension in PLC is shared leadership and supportive leadership (Hord, 1997a; 1997b). Hord argues that a positive impact on PLC occurs if school leaders and teachers share duties and responsibilities in the school. Leadership is also one of the most important dimensions in PLC because it has a strong and positive influence for leaders and teachers to share power and ideas in achieving the vision of the school (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). There are six advantages if the PLC is headed by a leader who is capable of leading. The six advantages are that leaders make it easier for PLC members to interact with each other; teachers are more likely to support all PLC activities if leaders are actively involved in PLC; the vision of the school is the basis of all actions; evoke development to cultivate professionalism; strengthen the PLC in the event of difficulties and collisions while running it; and leadership describes the overall PLC in the organization. Hoerr (1996) states that school leaders and teachers need to develop shared leadership so that they realize that they are a unit working together to achieve school goals. Leithwood, Steinbach, and Ryan (1997) state that school leaders need to encourage their teachers to work as a team and they need to respect each other. Louis and Kruse (1994) in turn argue that school leaders need support from teachers and students because it is a fundamental element in PLC and through this supportive leadership, school leaders realize that they are responsible for building an effective school. For a school to build a PLC, there are three main factors that leaders need to implement namely the ability to share power, the ability to offer facilities to teachers and their staff, as well as the ability to actively participate in school activities (Hord, 1997a).

Collective Learning and Learning Application

The third dimension outlined by Hord (1997a, 1997b) is collective learning and the application of learning. This dimension carries the meaning that school leaders and teachers need to know how to develop the community in the school. The formation of PLCs is an ongoing process and involves a process of collective learning between communities in schools (Hord & Sommers, 2007). Hord (1997a) also stressed that collective learning is very important in the implementation of PLC because it involves the exploration of new knowledge and subsequently practicing that knowledge in the classroom. This situation helps the school in ensuring that students' learning goals are achieved. For DuFour (1999) collective learning is an ongoing process of leading student learning and solving problems that occur in school. The process of collective learning helps teachers improve their knowledge and expertise in the subjects taught as well as improve their teaching skills and good practices to ensure student academic achievement as well as improved school quality (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). According to Norhayati (2009) in her study on the practice of PLC in schools in the district of Sepang found that all teachers need to collaborate



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with each other to continue to improve knowledge and skills, especially those related to the subjects taught. According to her, teachers need to familiarize themselves with higher level learning to meet the learning needs of students. Such a thing encourages teachers to continue to collaborate in learning new knowledge and skills and applying them in the classroom. Silo learning is no longer acceptable especially in 21st century learning.

Personal Practice Sharing

The fourth dimension in PLC is the sharing of personal practices (Hord, 1997b, 1997a). According to McREL (2003), teachers need to constantly work and learn alongside their peers by evaluating the good practices that have been made. They also need to know the needs, interests, and skills of each student. A study conducted by Bonces (2014) on the implementation of PLC in schools in Colombia found that the education system in the country benefits from the implementation of PLC because administrators and teachers comprising of various educational backgrounds and expertise work together to achieve school goals. According to him, knowing and practicing the good practices of other teachers will further enrich the teachers with knowledge, methods, and experience in improving the T&L process in the classroom and further improve students' academic achievement. According to Sujirah (2011), personal practice sharing is a process that encourages teachers to interact by sharing their good practices in the classroom as well as the experiences they gain while implementing the T&L process. Good practices and experiences during T&L are important to share to increase the added value that exists in each teacher. In this study she had suggested some personal practice sharing that can be practiced in school. Such practices are sharing the latest practices in T&L, providing feedback on student development, observing, and analysing student work, and encouraging teachers to share ideas, knowledge, and experiences. All these practices will enhance the knowledge and skills of teachers as well as be able to solve problems especially those involving the T&L process in the classroom. According to Hord (1997a) and Thompson et al. (2004) the definition of personal practice sharing is the consistent sharing of knowledge, expertise, and experience, conducting research if there are problems in the T&L process, learning among teachers collaboratively, exchanging teaching materials and methods to ensure the quality of student learning can be improved. In addition to sharing good practices, teachers also constantly provide motivation and enthusiasm to peers, and they also evaluate and analyse the results of students' responses as well as their academic development (Stoll et al., 2006). This sharing of personal practice not only added value to each teacher but more than that it is able to make teachers more sensitive to the needs of students in the classroom (Andrews & Lewis, 2002).

Organizational Support

The fifth dimension stated by Hord (1997a, 1997b) is organizational support. Hord (1997a) defines organizational support as interpersonal relationships (human) and physical resources (structural). Hipp and Huffman (2002) also agree with Hord (1997a) by stating that PLC only works when the organization has organizational support characteristics in terms of inter-employee relationships as well as school structure. These two features ensure that PLCs can continue to be cultured in schools and not just seasonally. This human relationship factor has five characteristics, namely a relationship that shows love, mutual trust, mutual respect, recognition, and celebration of success, daring to accept risks and making changes in a collaborative manner that has become a practice (embedded in the school community). While the structural factor consists of three main features, namely resources, facilities, and communication systems. Hipp and Huffman (2002) also outlined some of the characteristics of schools that have achieved good interpersonal relationships. Among the characteristics are the existence of cohesion among all members of the school, mutual love, respect, openness to criticism and advice, mutual concern and all other positive qualities that are important in the organization. Structural support for example is very important in developing and maintaining PLCs. Among the structural support that is so important in PLC is the resources needed by the school such as the financial position that will support all activities. This matter needs to be given serious attention for the survival of a PLC (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). Hord and Sommers (2007) also argue that the formation of PLCs in schools requires organizational support. Administrators and teachers need to help each other in improving knowledge and skills as well as cultivating good practices. According to them, the



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formation of a PLC requires a high level of understanding, a sense of sharing or belonging as well as strong support from the administrators. Thus, administrators need to be proactive in fostering a collaborative culture among teachers.

Past Studies on Professional Learning Community

Battersby and Verdi (2015) conducted a study on PLC culture and its relationship to teacher effectiveness and student learning support. The findings of the study show that the success of PLC requires the wholehearted commitment of teachers and administrators. This commitment is important to make this PLC a culture that is a reality and teachers need to be active PLC participants. The findings of the study also concluded that PLC is a long-term commitment, and it takes a long time to show results that will benefit the quality of teacher teaching and student academic achievement. Although PLC is still considered a new thing in Malaysia, but research on its implementation in schools has been conducted according to the context of education in this country. Marzuki et al. (2015) conducted a study aimed at assessing the level of implementation of the PLC dimension among the school community in religious national secondary schools (SMKA) in Johor, Malaysia. This mixed research method study involved 139 teachers and two SMKA principals in Johor. The findings of the study indicate the five dimensions of PLC outlined by Hord (1997a) namely vision and mission sharing; leadership partnerships and supportive leadership; collective learning and application of learning; sharing of personal practices; and organizational support was successfully implemented by principals and teachers at SMKA.

Musimartin (2014) also conducted a study to identify the relationship between PLC practices and teacher self-efficacy among teachers for three categories of primary school performance in Pasir Gudang district, namely high, medium, and weak. This survey study involved a total of 180 teachers as respondents. The findings of the study show that all PLC practices in each school are at a high level, while the level of self-efficacy of teachers is at a moderate level. The findings of the study also found that there were no significant differences in PLC practices for each category of school performance studied. PLC practice also had a significant relationship with teacher self-efficacy. The environmental (organizational) support dimension is the most dominant dimension of teacher self-efficacy. This proves that environmental support, whether in the form of relationships or school structure, plays an important role in improving teachers' self-efficacy, which in turn has an impact on students' academic achievement. The relevance of PLC and collaborative concepts is very significant. Faiz, Rozaimi, and Jamal@Nordin (2016) have conducted a study on PLC by relating it to the concept of collaborative. This concept paper study discusses the subject of PLC, the concept of collaborative in the implementation of PLC, as well as the practice of collaborative and PLC from an Islamic point of view. The findings of the study clearly prove that the concept of collaborative is fundamental to the implementation of PLC in schools. Administrators and teachers can no longer move or work alone. The study also found that PLC is a new approach to develop students' academic achievement. To that end, the role of school leaders is very important and based on the findings of this study, school leadership is proven to be able to improve student academic achievement.

Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox (2015) also conducted a study on the importance of trust and collaboration in PLC teams in schools. This case study has recognized trust and collaboration as important elements in PLC. This study successfully found some findings regarding the formation of effective PLC. First, the development of trust among PLC team members is very important and school leaders are responsible for ensuring that such development takes place. Second, the trust element facilitates collaborative between team members who want to implement PLC. Without this element, then the sharing of knowledge and experience between team members becomes difficult because there is suspicion among them. Third, the stronger and firmer the value of trust, the closer the collaboration among team members. Fourth, trust also influences the extent to which teachers frequently share teaching strategies and the extent to which teachers are open to data related to student academic achievement. Fifth, this study shows that a high value of trust is essential for teachers to share all their personal practices to other teachers (deprivatization) and this partnership is the cornerstone of an effective PLC.



RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

A total of 15 teachers were chosen for this study using homogeneous purposive sampling, including four teachers from two schools in Negeri Sembilan, four teachers from two schools in Melaka, and seven teachers from four schools in Johor.

How The Protocol's Items and Observation Checklist Developed?

Because this study was based on an explanatory sequential design, the interview questions and observation checklists were only created after the questionnaire instrument had been completed and analysed. Semi-structured interviews were used to acquire qualitative data in this study. Semi-structured interviews, according to Edwards and Holland (2013), are halfway between structured and unstructured interviews. Although the researcher had the freedom to examine and explore the answers offered by the participants, formal questions were established early on. These interview questions were developed in response to isolated and severe findings discovered throughout the quantitative study. This study also created a checklist with information such as 10 functions of instructional leadership and critical sites in schools where principals are thought to exercise instructional leadership to implement the observation procedure. The researcher used this checklist to keep track of any key behaviours connected to instructional leadership.

Trustworthiness and validity

Validity and dependability require qualitative data obtained through interviews and observations, and they are intimately tied to internal and external consistency (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Miles, Huberman, & Salfida, 2014; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). The interview's reliability can be improved by carefully organising the interview. The interviews must be carefully designed, according to Silverman (2014), to ensure that the interview data has a high level of reliability. Each participant's interview should follow the same format and word sequence, as well as including the same questions. He also proposed that each participant have the same comprehension of the interview questions. Thus, dependability can be improved through a variety of methods, including careful scheduling of interviews, interview training, correct data coding, and the use of closed-ended questions (Silverman, 2014). The researcher has made certain that the interviews and observations are conducted in a systematic and well-organized manner. The interview was scheduled ahead of time and conducted according to the participants' comfort and availability. When a question is poorly understood, the researcher does not mind elaborating it with examples to help people comprehend it better. The duration of the interview is also usually kept to a minimum of 60 minutes. For external validity, the researcher tracked down the interviewees and offered them a full transcript of the conversation to read, examine, and confirm their agreement. If not, the adjustment is carried out in accordance with their wishes. Despite this, everyone in the study agreed with what was written in the transcript.

This study used the triangulation method to determine the validity and reliability of qualitative data findings. Triangulation, according to Gay et al. (2012), is the use of a variety of procedures, data collection strategies, and data sources to obtain a more complete picture of what is being examined and to cross-check the information acquired. According to him, triangulation is the most effective approach to assure the validity of qualitative research findings. Triangulation is a procedure that uses interview and observation approaches on study subjects to improve the validity and reliability of qualitative data (Yin, 2011). The researcher employed observational data collection without direct engagement in qualitative data collection for the observational data collection approach. Construct validity methodologies were used to ensure the validity of this observational activity. Events or occurrences that have been observed were sorted into different groups using this construct validity technique based on the required variables (Bailey, 2008). While the technique of data collection observation was based on the



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way and process of observation was done, the reliability of the method of data collection observation was based on the way and process of observation was done. According to Laine (2000), making observations directly by the researcher can improve the dependability of the observation data gathered.

Pilot Study

The instruments for this investigation were an interview protocol and an observation checklist. A pilot study was done to confirm that the interview technique and an observation checklist were reliable and valid. The pilot study, which took place on March 13, 2018, only featured a single instructor from a single school. The researcher was able to get perspectives from the participants on their comprehension of instructional leadership methods because of performing this pilot study. Upon completion, it was discovered that some questions required additional explanation to ensure that the participants understood the questions. In fact, towards the conclusion of the session, a participant stated that there were a few questions that were unclear and need further explanation. In terms of duration, the pilot study lasted 63 minutes, which was regarded reasonable. In general, the pilot project for qualitative data collecting was judged to be successful, particularly for interviews, because all the material gathered was valuable and helped the researcher preparing for the actual interview (Yin, 2011). Furthermore, the researcher may ensure that all questions provided to the actual participants were straightforward and understandable (Kalof, Dan, & Dietz, 2008).

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews and observations were used to acquire qualitative data for this study. According to Patton (2015), qualitative data analysis entails several critical steps, including data organisation, topic construction, data coding according to themes, data evaluations, and conclusion. The main process of qualitative data analysis was like what Wellington (2015) suggested, which was to code each data unit, verify code, assigned categories to each code, built themes and sub-themes, checked each category as well as the theme to ensure that they did not overlap, and finally got the correlations, comparisons, similarities, and differences between themes and sub-themes. Researchers utilised NVivo12 software to store, compile, and analyse qualitative data obtained from interviews to make data administration easier. The researcher manually analysed the observation data, which involved gathering and saving all the photographs taken throughout the observation procedure and then assembling them depending on the theme that had been created. This qualitative data management procedure was meticulously planned and executed to ensure that the data acquired was accurate and reliable.

The researcher did an assessment of the interview data by creating a special code that was suited to the theme discovered. The 15 teachers who took part in the interviews, for example, were assigned the codes G01 through G15. The codes IVK1, IVK2, and IVK3 were generated for the interview questions based on the three characteristics of instructional leadership. Interviews were referred to as IV, and the initial dimension of instructional leadership was referred to as K1. Then, to indicate the ten functions found in the three dimensions, the codes F1 to F10 were appended. All these codes were also listed alongside the date of the interview. The findings from the initial participants of the interview addressing the first dimension of instructional leadership and the second function, which is to explain the school goals obtained on 15/03/2018, were the examples of a comprehensive code for interview data. This code was created to make it easier for the researcher to refer to or revise while writing chapters 4 and 5.

The researcher investigated the involvement of principals and teachers in the implementation of instructional leadership methods in schools during the observation process. The observation checklist included images as well as any information connected to these observations. The results of these observations were analysed to supplement the interview data. The code began with the school code, which ranges from SK1 to SK8 to reflect the eight schools visited. Following that was the abbreviation "OB," which stands for "observation." Then F1 to F10 for the 10



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functions in those three dimensions, and K1 to K3 for the three aspects of instructional leadership. The date the observation process was implemented was also included in this code. The entire code for observational data, for example, was SK1OBP3 - 19/04/18. To address the fifth research question, all these qualitative analyses were applied. The fifth study question was on how principals put their strategies into action when fulfilling ten instructional leadership functions.

FINDINGS

Strategies for the Implementation of Professional Learning Community in the Southern Zone of Malaysia

Strategies for Shared Vision and Mission

Based on interviews and observations, it was found that teachers in the southern zone of Malaysia have practiced the dimension of shared vision and mission. The strategies were to collaborate with fellow teachers to achieve the vision and mission, focus on sharing the vision and mission on student learning, making the vision and mission as a reference and guide and lastly was to plan programs in line with the vision and mission. The following are some of the answers of the participants after being asked the question of how the teachers implement this dimension.

“If we want to do any program, we always discuss. We made that PLC. The cooperation of teachers is also important. You can't do it alone ...” (G13TBP1 - 29/3/2018)

“The vision and the mission are mostly about student success. So, let's talk about that...” (G14TBP1 - 29/3/2018)

“This vision and mission are our guide and reference. That is why it is necessary to paste in the book...” (G08TBP1 - 12/4/2018)

“... If teachers want to plan any program, it must be in line with the vision and mission of the school ...” (G05TBP1-2/4/2018)

Strategies for Leadership Sharing and Supportive Leadership

Teachers in the southern zone of Malaysia were also found to practice the dimension of leadership sharing and supportive leadership. Among the strategies implemented were to be involved in decision making and taking responsibility for those decisions, made changes for the progress of the school, received guidance from the headmaster to become an effective school leader and finally participated in school management planning. The following are some of the responses of participants when asked whether they have practiced this second dimension.

“... I am ready to take responsibility when making decisions. As the head, I inform my teachers, they do not have to be afraid because if there is monitoring, I will answer all questions...” (G06TBP2-2/4/2018)

“... For example, the Young Doctors Club.... the school does not want to open this club. But I told the administrator that I want to try... alhamdulillah now this school has this club and various successes have been achieved...” (G01TBP2 - 3/4/2018)

“The headmaster told us about his experience ... He guided us. What we can do, what we can't do..” (G02TBP2 - 3/4/2018)



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"I am directly involved in school management planning. Usually, the end of the year I will always be in school. I help the administrators to fine tune SKPMG2..." (G01TBP2 - 3/4/2018)

Strategies for Collective Learning and Learning Application

For the third dimension, it was found that teachers in the southern zone of Malaysia had implemented several strategies such as sharing information with colleagues to improve the quality of student learning, discussing student learning issues to create a culture of learning together, building mentoring teams, setting up PLC teams and implementing them and lastly producing learning modules. The following are some of the participants' answers regarding the strategies.

"... Every time I attend a meeting, or I get new knowledge I will share with friends ..." (G01TBP3-3/4/2018)

"... I always discuss the issue of student learning with friends. Mention the student's name and we will know the student's behaviour..." (G04TBP3 - 17/4/2018)

"Indirectly, there is this mentoring activity. Senior or experienced teachers guide young teachers ..." (G15TBP3- 13/3/2018)

"In this school, we practice a culture of learning together during PLC. We share knowledge, ideas, and experiences..." (G05TBP3 - 2/4/2018)

"... My friends and I have produced learning modules. We discuss together..." (G01TBP3 - 3/4/2018)

Strategies for Personal Practice Sharing

For this third dimension, several strategies have been practiced ensuring that PLC is implemented in schools. The strategies were reflected after the completion of T&L, to adjust students' test scores, to share good T&L practices, and finally to make observations on the T&L of fellow teachers. The following are the answers of the participants regarding the strategies they practice in implementing this strategy.

"... Teachers in this school really need to reflect after T&L... need to write in RPH and the principal will check ..." (G08TBP4 - 12/4/2018)

"... I have a discussion on the coordination of test scores with other teachers. Ask them to comment so that I can improve my skills in marking answer sheets ..." (G10TBP4 - 1/4/2018)

"... Indeed, we share good practices... teachers who get new knowledge or techniques in teaching, we share it..." (G12TBP4- 4/4/2018)

"... Indeed, the culture in the English panel, teachers observe their peers, not to give marks but to learn how to teach with other teachers ..." (G06TBP4-2/4/2018)

Strategies for Organizational Support

There are several strategies that had been implemented by teachers in the southern zone of Malaysia related to the fifth dimension of organizational support. The strategies were to celebrate each school's success together, receive recognition from the principal when it achieved a success, used the financial allocation provided, used the ICT facilities available in the school, and the last was to meet with the



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headmaster to discuss academic or non-academic matters. Here are the teachers' answers when asked about the dimension of organizational support.

"... This school celebrates every success achieved. Regardless of teacher or student..." (G02TBP5 - 3/4/2018)

"... The principal has given a written appreciation, in the form of a certificate..." (G05TBK3F8 - 2/4/2018)

"... The financial assistance that the panel gets is usually used to the full..." (G07TBP5 - 12/4/2018)

"... This school provides ICT facilities for me and other teachers to carry out T&L activities..." (G04TBP5-17/4/2018)

"... Always, I often meet the principal to discuss. Meet because there are important things to discuss..." (G06TBP5 - 2/4/2018)

Overall, this study found dozens of strategies used by teachers in implementing professional learning community through 5 dimensions. Each dimension consisted of four to five strategies that had been practiced ensuring that the professional learning community can be cultivated in schools.

DISCUSSION

Strategies for Shared Vision and Mission

The strategy practiced by teachers in this first dimension coincides with what was suggested by Hord (2004) who stated that a school needs to share the same vision and mission if it wants the PLC team in the school to be more effective. Senge (1990) also outlines that shared vision sharing is one of the five disciplines in implementing learning organizations. DuFour (2004) also emphasizes the issue of vision and mission by listing it as the first feature in PLC that is vision, mission, values, and shared goals. Meanwhile, Hord (1997a, 1997b) stated that one of the main keys to the success of PLC in schools is to share a vision and mission to maintain a learning culture among leaders, teachers, and students. Similarly, Cormier and Olivier (2009) believe that sharing this vision and mission is important to improve the quality of student learning. Sergioivanni and Green (2015) also noted the important vision and mission sharing dimensions in PLC cultivating. According to him, this dimension serves as a link that unites everyone in the school. Therefore, administrators, teachers and students who have cultivated this shared vision and mission tend to encourage every individual in the school to have a sense of responsibility and subsequently practice it in every action. Schools belong together and this partnership is the main core to their togetherness. Feger and Arruda (2008) as well as Bolam et al. (2005) also argue that the sharing of vision and mission is essential in the improvement of a school. This partnership means that all communities whether inside or outside the school must always be sensitive and help support each other to ensure that the vision and mission of the school is achieved.

The first strategy of collaborating with fellow teachers has been in line with the study conducted by Xiao and Saedah (2015) who have conducted a study of the literature related to PLC in the world of education. The findings of the study show that PLC is a medium that allows teachers to collaborate with their peers to improve teaching skills and thus improve the quality of learning and provide a positive impact on student academic achievement. The relevance of PLC and collaborative concept is also very significant and based on the study conducted by Faiz et al. (2016), Hallam et al. (2015) and Ting (2015) clearly prove that the concept of collaborative is fundamental to the implementation of PLC in schools. Based on all these studies, administrators and teachers can no longer work alone in driving school development. They must stand shoulder to shoulder and work together to ensure that the vision and mission of the school is achieved. Regarding the second strategy, which is to focus the vision and mission on



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student learning, it is in line with the recommendations of Toole and Louis (2002) who stated that PLC should be student learning oriented. Similarly, King and Newmann (2001) argue that producing quality student learning is the collective responsibility of teachers. This strategy is also in line with the findings of Reichstetter's (2006) study that the focus should be given priority in the sharing of vision and mission is to improve student learning activities and it should be done together. Some western scholars also agree that building a school vision and mission should demonstrate the cooperation and collective responsibility of all parties in the school as well as focus fully on the student learning process (Bolam et al., 2005; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Louis & Kruse, 1994). Hipp and Huffman (2002), also explained that vision and mission sharing should focus on student learning but requires the cooperation of administrators and teachers in setting vision and mission.

Strategies for Leadership Sharing and Supportive Leadership

The determination of teachers to implement this dimension, fits some of the findings of the study either locally or abroad. Hord (1997a; 1997b) states that a positive effect on PLC will occur if school leaders and teachers share duties and responsibilities in a school. Cormier and Olivier (2009) also argue that leadership is one of the most important dimensions in PLC because leadership has a strong and positive influence for leaders and teachers to share power and ideas in achieving school vision. Hoerr (1996) explains that school leaders and teachers need to develop shared leadership so that they realize that they are a unit working together to achieve school goals. Whereas, according to Leithwood et al. (1997) meanwhile school leaders need to encourage their teachers to work as a team and they need to respect each other. The first and fourth strategies of engaging in decision-making and participating in school management planning are a form of teacher support to school leaders and the trust of school leaders to their teachers. Such support is important as stated by Louis and Kruse (1994) that school leaders need support from teachers and students because it is a fundamental element in PLC. Through this supportive leadership, school leaders realize that they have a responsibility to build an effective school. Similarly, the findings of Faiz and Jamal (2015), which showed that the implementation of PLC in a school will be more structured if it gets support and guidance from school leaders.

The importance of power sharing between principals and teachers is also agreed upon by Hord (1997a). He has outlined three key factors implemented by school leaders to build PLCs. One of those factors is the ability of school leaders to share power with teachers through the distribution of power. Hord and Sommers (2007) also explain that authority, power, and partnership in decision making are the most important factors in PLC. Thus, the strategy of engaging in decision making and being responsible for those decisions is a very appropriate strategy in realizing this second dimension. This strategy is supported by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) as well as Olivier and Hipp (2006) who stated that to train teachers to be school leaders in the future, school leaders need to provide opportunities for teachers to participate in decision making. Cormier and Olivier (2009) agree that school leaders need to develop the concept of democracy and their necessary behaviour toward power sharing. They need to receive thoughtful suggestions from teachers and staff that can contribute to the formation of effective leadership partnerships. Similarly, the findings of a study conducted by Faiz and Jamal (2015) who stated that among the elements of leadership that can succeed PLC in a school is that school leaders need to involve teachers in collaborative decision making and encourage teachers to take risks by trying new things in making changes.

Strategies for Collective Learning and Learning Application

Based on the five strategies implemented by teachers in cultivating this third dimension, it aims to improve their knowledge and skills in the aspect of teaching. Sharing information, discussing student learning issues, building mentoring teams, implementing PLCs, and producing learning modules for students proves that teachers strive to increase knowledge, skills and experience in matters related to teaching and learning. This situation is seen in line with what was stated by Toole and Louis (2002) that teachers who are actively involved in this PLC will improve their professional knowledge and in turn improve the quality of student learning. Regarding the first strategy of sharing information with colleagues to improve the quality of student learning, it is in line with what was suggested



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by Hord (1997a) based on his views on PLC. According to him, PLC needs school leaders and teachers who are constantly striving to deepen new knowledge and share the latest learning techniques on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving students' academic achievement. Cormier and Olivier (2009) also stated that dimension of collective learning helps teachers improve their expertise and knowledge in the subjects taught to ensure the academic achievement of students as well as the academic quality of the school increases.

The efforts of teachers to increase knowledge and skills through the implementation of the five strategies also meet the findings of a study conducted by Norhayati (2009) on the practice of PLC in schools in the district of Sepang. Her study found that all teachers need to collaborate with each other to improve knowledge and skills, especially those related to the subjects taught. According to her, teachers need to familiarize themselves with higher level learning to meet the learning needs of students. Such a thing will encourage teachers to continue to collaborate in learning new knowledge and skills and applying them in the classroom. She added that silo learning is no longer acceptable, especially in 21st century learning. Eaker et al. (2002) also stated about the importance of creating a culture of learning together among teachers and administrators. This opinion is in line with the second strategy carried out by teachers at national schools in the three states of the Southern Zone of Malaysia. Based on the research they had done; teachers and administrators need to learn in groups to improve their knowledge and skills and no longer move in silos in seeking knowledge. This view is also in line with the opinion of Andrews and Lewis (2002) that this partnership and collaborative learning can build better knowledge among teachers than if they learn in silos. Eaker et al. (2002) have also detailed activities that can be implemented to cultivate the dimensions of collective learning and the application of learning and among the activities is to produce interventions to solve problems involving poor student academic achievement. This activity is seen to be like some of the strategies that have been implemented by the teachers in this study.

The culture of sharing knowledge, information, and skills in the success of learning activities together is also evident when teachers implement five strategies in this dimension. This sharing and collaborative learning is in line with the findings of a study conducted by Nicholas et al. (2016). A study on the characteristics of PLCs practiced in primary schools in Hong Kong has found six areas that need to be practiced by leaders and teachers to cultivate PLCs in schools. Among the six areas are the ability to learn collaboratively, focus on student learning and the existence of a culture of knowledge sharing. As for the mentoring team building strategy, this effort is in line with a study conducted by Ting (2015) on PLC practices in two high-performing secondary schools in Northeast China. The study clearly states that the cultivating of PLC can create mentoring activities among teachers that can lead to improving the quality of the teaching process of teachers and student learning.

Strategies for Personal Practice Sharing

The first strategy employed by teachers in implementing this dimension is to reflect upon completion of T&L. This reflection writing is an instruction from the principal and all teachers must write it to describe the overall course of the T&L process that has been implemented. The level of student mastery as well as further action for the next T&L are among the reflections that need to be expressed each time the T&L ends. This strategy coincides with the findings of Toole and Louis (2002) who stated that reflection on T&L conducted is a way to investigate and critically evaluate their own teaching practices with the goal of improving their professional knowledge as teachers can further improve the quality of student learning. A study conducted by Faiz and Jamal (2015) also found findings that are like this strategy by outlining some practices that leaders can do to ensure PLC cultivating in their schools is successful. One of the practices is to ensure that their teachers reflect on the teaching process to determine the effectiveness of their teaching on student learning.

The second strategy practiced by teachers is to moderate (adjustment) students' test scores. Through this strategy, teachers constantly discuss the quality of students' answers in each test to improve the teacher's skills in terms of marking test papers. This sharing of personal practice occurs when this discussion involves many teachers comprising of different levels of knowledge and experience. More experienced teachers help new teachers. This



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practice of moderation is in line with the view of Hord (1997a), Thompson et al. (2004) and Stoll et al. (2006) that is, apart from sharing good practices, teachers also need to evaluate and analyse the results of students' answers as well as their academic development. This second strategy is also in line with the findings of the study of Eaker et al. (2002) who stated that collaborative culture such as team learning is one of the main features that must be present in a school that wants to cultivate PLC practices. Among the strategies that can be implemented in filling the learning activities in a team is to bring students' answer sheets consisting of various levels to assess the teacher's marking skills and the level of understanding of each student. They also discussed interventions that can be taken to solve problems involving poor student academic achievement.

The third strategy is to share good teaching practices that have proven to be effective. This partnership allows some teachers who have a particular teaching technique or method to disseminate the technique to other fellow teachers with the aim of improving their teaching skills. This strategy has been most discussed about by previous researchers. According to Barth (2006), school management and teachers need to collaborate to share best practices in T&L and adopt them. He added that this partnership should benefit students' learning. Weber (1996) also argues so by calling on all school leaders to assist teachers by providing space and time for teachers to share and subsequently use the good practices of T&L that exist among them. This partnership is also important to enable students to achieve the goals set by the school. Some researchers such as Barth (1990), Glasman (1984), Hallinger and Murphy (1986), Heck et al. (1990), Leithwood and Montgomery (1982), Mortimore (1993), Purkey and Smith (1983) as well as McREL (2003) also encourage the sharing of good practices that can contribute to sustainable development in a school. Similarly, a study conducted by Bonces (2014) on the implementation of PLC in schools in Colombia. The study concluded that, knowing and practicing the good practices of other teachers will further enrich the teachers with knowledge, methods, and experience in improving the T&L process and thus improve student academic achievement.

The fourth strategy is to make observations on teachers' T&L. This strategy is in line with the findings of a study conducted by Musimartin (2014) that is, through the sharing of personal practices, teachers voluntarily and openly re-evaluate T&L practices themselves and other teachers. This assessment can be carried out by observing the T&L process of teacher peers and then bringing the findings from those observations into group discussion. Through this approach, teachers can find out their strengths and weaknesses while conducting the T&L process because of peer feedback. This peer T&L monitoring strategy is also in line with the findings of a study on leadership and PLC in schools conducted by Faiz and Jamal (2015). The study found that school leaders need to support such observational activities by providing adequate time for teachers to supervise each other. This is to enable teachers to share ideas and knowledge as well as their experience in implementing a quality T&L process and this partnership is formulated as one of the important practices in cultivating PLC in schools.

Strategies for Organizational Support

The strategy obtained in this study also meets the findings of Hipp and Huffman (2002) by stating that PLC only works when the organization has the characteristics of organizational support in terms of inter-employee relations and the facilities of the school structure. These two features ensure that PLCs can continue to be cultivated in schools and not just seasonally. This human relationship factor has five characteristics namely relationships that show love, trust and respect, recognition and celebrate success, dare to take risks, and make changes in a collaborative manner that has become a practice in the school communities. Structural factors consist of three main features, namely resources, facilities, and communication systems. Cormier and Olivier (2009) also argue that among the structural support that is so important in PLC is the financial resources of the school that will support all activities for the sake of sustainability related to it.

Looking at the five strategies mentioned above, it shows that the principals in the schools show a strong support for their teachers. Principals giving recognition to teachers, providing financial allocation and ICT facilities as well as being willing to discuss any issues are forms of support that strengthen PLC practices in schools. This finding is in



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line with the view of Hord and Sommers (2007) who argue that the formation of PLCs in schools is in dire need of organizational support. Administrators and teachers need to help each other in improving knowledge and skills as well as cultivating good practices. According to them, the formation of a PLC requires a high level of understanding, a sense of sharing or belonging as well as strong support from the administrators. Based on a detailed explanation of the various strategies implemented by national school teachers in the three states of the Southern Zone of Malaysia in adopting PLC, it is clear that PLC culture among them does exist and most of what is implemented is in line with previous research findings. Thus, the researchers believe that the efforts made by leaders and teachers to implement the implementation of PLC in their respective schools are on the right track and hope that it continues to be maintained or enhanced for the sake of student excellence.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has detailed the findings on the implementation strategies of professional learning community among teachers in three states in the Southern Zone of Malaysia. Having analysed and discussed all the findings, then this study certainly has implications for the knowledge and understanding of professional learning community. The results of this study provide a significant contribution to many parties, especially education policy makers, principals, and middle leaders in Malaysia. The findings of this study should be an important source of reference for the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), Aminuddin Baki Institute (IAB), State Education Departments (JPN) and all District Education offices (PPD) to strengthen professional learning community' practices in schools. The main purpose of this strengthening is to increase the excellence of schools in Malaysia to be on par with schools in developed countries and further achieve world-class quality education. The various strategies obtained in this study are so important to ensure that PLC can be cultivated in schools. These strategies can be disseminated to all school leaders and teachers so that they understand and are able to implement them. School leaders and teachers are encouraged to apply all these strategies and make them a reference to improve PLC practices for the sake of school progress as well as the excellence of student academic performance.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the aim of identifying the strategies employed by teachers in implementing professional learning community (PLC) practices. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings of this study become part of the wealth of knowledge related to PLC and can provide benefits and benefits to national education policy makers, school leaders, middle school leaders and teachers who are interested in deepening knowledge about this practice. The practice and cultivating of PLC among teachers are important to ensure that efforts to improve the quality of teacher teaching and student learning can be realized jointly for the sake of school excellence. The success of doing great and best things is not achieved only through the efforts of one individual, but it is achieved with the mobilization of the energy of all parties in an organization.

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