

Learning Action Cell in Professional Development: Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract

This research study investigates the implementation and impact of Learning Action Cells (LACs) as a professional development strategy for school teachers. The LAC sessions are initiatives the Department of Education implemented to promote professional development among public school teachers through mentoring sessions. The study employed a phenomenological research design where 10 participants were interviewed to explore their experiences with the LAC implementation. The challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights gained by the participants were comprehensively discussed. The research findings revealed that teachers viewed LAC sessions as collaborative and necessary for professional development. The participants acknowledged its contribution to furthering their knowledge about their skills, for example, in pedagogical implementation and use of technology. However, it was surmised that the lack of material equipment and time resources hindered the program's proper implementation. The hectic schedule of teachers, who handle multiple workloads, is an excellent source of stress and problems. As a result, teacher participants view LAC sessions as additional work or extensions to their already overwhelming tasks. In order to cope, the participants employed time management techniques, suggested flexible schedules, and increased collaboration among their peers.

Keywords: Learning Action Cells, Professional Development, Collaborative Engagement, Challenges in LAC Implementation, Coping Mechanisms in LAC Implementation

1. Introduction

Global educational systems are undergoing significant transformations to meet the sustainable development goal of providing quality education for all and adapting to contemporary needs (UNESCO, 2015). De Vera et al. (2021) highlight the necessity for a hopeful and robust approach to reforming the current education system. Teachers play a vital role in this endeavor by taking personal initiative, encouraging innovation, and participating in reforms. Professional development programs are instrumental in organizing these efforts, though they also present challenges for educators and leaders alike.

One relevant strategy to address these challenges is the Learning Action Cell (LAC), introduced by the Department of Education (DepEd) through the DepEd Order 35 series of 2016. LACs aim to enhance teachers' pedagogical skills, instructional methods, and assessment techniques through structured, cost-effective school-based development. These collaborative peer-support mechanisms allow teachers to share experiences, reflect on their practices, and tackle challenges collectively, fostering ongoing professional growth and improved teaching practices.

Participating in LAC sessions has increased teachers' job satisfaction and organizational productivity by reducing workload and fostering collaboration (Bajar et al., 2021). Teachers must maintain a positive attitude and focus on their profession's purpose, addressing their students' needs and career goals in an unpredictable world (Lobo, 2016; Stefaniak, 2020). Internationally, countries like Finland, the United States, India, and Malaysia have implemented similar collaborative and peer-support processes, demonstrating the effectiveness of such approaches in various educational settings (Niemi, 2015; Popova et al., 2021; Ambadkar, 2014; Jamil et al., 2011).

In the Philippines, while implementing LACs presents unique challenges, such as limited resources, time constraints, resistance to change, and effective facilitation (Culajara, 2022; Silva, 2021), providing adequate support and resources for their success is crucial. Addressing these issues is essential to securing the quality and sustainability of LACs, which are vital for the professional development of teachers. This study aims to explore Filipino public school teachers' challenges and coping mechanisms in the context of LACs, offering insights and recommendations to enhance the education system and support teachers in their mission to shape the nation's future.

With all the remarks in the present literature, this study sought to advance the discourse on Filipino public school teachers' challenges and coping mechanisms in the context of Learning Action Cells (LAC). With a central focus on promoting quality education and fostering teacher development, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the obstacles and opportunities encountered in implementing LACs as perceived by the teachers. By amalgamating the wealth of local and international knowledge, this paper will offer recommendations and insights that can contribute to the goals of improving education in the Philippines, ensuring that the dedicated public school teachers at the forefront receive the support they deserve in their quest to shape the nation's future.

This study aims to deepen the understanding of Filipino public school teachers' challenges and coping mechanisms regarding Learning Action Cells (LACs). Focusing on promoting quality education and teacher development, it examines the obstacles and opportunities faced in LAC implementation from teachers' perspectives. By integrating local and international insights, the research offers recommendations to improve education in the Philippines, ensuring teachers receive the necessary support to shape the nation's future.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Simonson's Equivalency Theory (1999) and the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Simonson's theory emphasizes balancing the learner, teacher, and content/resources, highlighting the need to tailor content to teachers' needs for effective professional development. The COI framework identifies social, cognitive, and teaching presences as essential for creating a supportive and dynamic learning environment. Combining these theories results in programs that foster critical thinking, reflective practice, and community among teachers, ultimately enhancing professional growth and improving the educational landscape (Garrison et al., 2000; Simonson, 1999).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative inquiry approach, specifically a phenomenological design, to examine the lived experiences of individuals. Within the qualitative research paradigm, phenomenology aims to

deeply understand and describe the essence of human experiences (Creswell, 2013). The methodology focuses on capturing authentic experiences through in-depth interviews and detailed data analysis rather than examining causal relationships or predicting future outcomes.

Researchers carefully selected participants who had specific experiences and could articulate them effectively. Using open-ended questions, researchers conducted extensive interviews, meticulously transcribing and analyzing the data to identify recurring themes and patterns (Van Manen, 2014). This rigorous process involved multiple examinations of the transcripts to distill commonalities, which were then synthesized into a comprehensive report summarizing the core ideas and prominent themes. The study also discussed the implications of the findings and offered recommendations for future research (Moustakas, 1994).

3.2 Research Participants

This study was rolled out in DepEd Region XI, particularly in the Schools Division of Davao City. Only 10 participants from the select elementary schools were chosen on purpose to serve as the key informants. The participants of this study were selected according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria. For the inclusion criteria: (1) the teacher-respondent must have experience participating in the school learning action cells (SLAC); and (b) the teacher-respondent has served as LAC facilitator/speaker. On the other hand, the following are set as exclusion parameters: (1) non-teaching staff and (2) beginning teachers who have no experience in participating in LAC.

3.3 Data Analysis

To ensure that the qualitative data are ushered to appropriate treatment, thematic analysis will be considered. This widely employed method is particularly effective when scrutinizing subjective data, often found in extensive textual materials such as interview transcripts. During this process, the researcher meticulously examined the data to discern recurrent themes, ideas, and consistent patterns of meaning. When examining interview data, the primary objective was to identify and elucidate these themes, thus revealing the underlying patterns.

An advantageous feature of thematic analysis is its adaptability, making it suitable for both deductive studies, where the researcher has predefined interests, and exploratory studies, where the researcher embarks without preconceived notions of the sought-after patterns. Kaiser (2009) stressed that regardless of the nature or purpose of the study, the researcher's utmost commitment is to handle the data with care and precision, ensuring an accurate portrayal of the interview's findings.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Experiences of teachers with the implementation of LAC sessions

4.1.1 Collaborative

The analysis of the themes suggests that the Learning Action Cell sessions fostered a collaborative approach to the learning process and practices of the study participants. The responses of the study participants were as follows:

“It is a collaborative learning process and practice. It has been widely explored and implemented.” (P1)

“It is where teachers work together to improve their instructional practices, share ideas, and also address challenges.” (P2)

P1 suggested that the entire approach and implementation of the LAC was collaborative overall. This aligns with the insights shared by P2, which highlighted that working together as a team has improved teachers' instructional practices as ideas were shared and challenges were addressed collectively. These findings coincide with the findings of Killion (2015), who underscored that collaboration benefits teachers and students in the long run.

4.1.2 Necessary for Professional Development

One of the purposes of implementing the Learning Action Cell in schools is to uphold teachers' professional growth in the teaching practice. Teachers' motivation for professional development has been a subject of many discussions. Appova and Arbaugh (2018) argued that teachers often internalize images of ideal educators and frequently compare themselves with such images. This motivates teachers to seek professional development opportunities to hone their potential and pedagogical performance. However, the study also revealed that current professional development requirements often emphasize quantity over the quality of teachers' learning. The lack of resources and time constraints also demotivated teachers about seeking PD opportunities. Below are the inputs of the study participants, to wit:

“In the professional aspect, it is both professional and personal development as the LAC offers new teaching methods, technologies and strategies.” (P1)

“It focuses on improving teaching practices, it can have better learning outcomes and can benefit both teachers and learners.” (P2)

“Teachers must be well equipped and must have the know-how with regards to the new platforms. We need to work together.” (P4)

“It can help/develop personal and professional growth, conducive working environment and content and pedagogical knowledge.” (P5)

“It provides a meaningful experience for teachers and is helpful for them to improve the teaching-learning process, which will lead to improved learning among the students and help improve their content and pedagogical knowledge, practice, skills and attitudes.” (P9)

According to Zein (2015), professional development is essential for teachers to grow in their practice. However, problems may arise when teachers are not given the chance to be exposed to opportunities for career growth. P1 suggested that the LAC offers professional and personal growth where teachers can learn new pedagogical techniques and strategies. This is in line with the views of P2, where s/he emphasized that LAC reinforces better learning outcomes benefited by teachers and learners. Meanwhile, P4 suggested that teachers must be well-equipped to use new platforms. In order to do so, collaboration in using these platforms is needed. In addition, P5 advocated that LAC reinforces personal and professional growth in content and pedagogical knowledge. Meanwhile, P9 suggested that LAC provides meaningful experiences for teachers, improving the teaching and learning process.

4.1.3 Lack of resources

Two themes emerged under the lack of resources – shortage in funds and time. Below are the comments of the study participants:

“Insufficient funding, implementation challenges.” (P1)

“Lack of resources/lack of funds.” (P2)

“One of the factors is the resources or funds.” (P10)

The study by Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006) revealed that the lack of resources is a significant factor affecting teacher burnout and work engagement. Schools needing to be financially funded could limit the available resources that educators could use in several facets of work, such as the teaching and learning process or for professional growth. These findings align with the study of Haydon and Stevens (2018), where it was found that the lack of available resources in schools often increased stress and burnout levels.

P1 mentioned that there needs to be more funding for the LAC initiatives. This aligns with the observation of P2 and P10, emphasizing the lack of funds and resources in the Learning Action Cell implementation. The lack of funds could lead to reduced access to professional growth and development resources. For instance, schools may need to be equipped to provide teachers with technology equipment to practice with or use in their teaching and learning practice.

Additionally, the study participants also highlighted time insufficiency as one of the factors hindering the effective implementation of the LAC.

“Lack of time and resources.” (P4)

“Lack of time in conducting the LAC sessions, lack of funds and the preparation.” (P8)

On average, teachers are required to conduct six (6) hours of actual teaching in the classroom and another two (2) hours accomplishing other teaching-related tasks such as lesson preparation and crafting of educational materials (DepEd, 2009). However, with the weight of teachers’ work on a day-to-day basis, time comes across as insufficient for educators.

P4 mentioned that the lack of time [and physical] resources during the LAC sessions makes it difficult. Moreover, P8 emphasized that the LAC sessions’ lack of funding and teachers’ time to prepare due to the amount of workload hinders the program’s proper implementation.

4.2 Coping Mechanisms

4.2.1 Time Management

One of the themes that emerged is teachers’ time management skills. Time management plays a significant role in properly executing the Learning Action Cells in the Department of Education. As a demanding profession, teaching calls for the ability to manage time efficiently. Below are the participants’ responses, to wit:

“Prioritize time management, set clear goals, advocate for more resources, and build a support system.” (P1)

“Time management and embrace a growth mindset an open-mindedness, be resourceful.” (P2)

“Time management is critical. I adjusted my hectic schedule to meet the demands of participating in LAC sessions.” (P9)

P1 suggested that honing one’s time management skills could help implement the LAC sessions, setting clear goals, upholding resources, and building a support system. Moreover, P2 emphasized that embracing a growth mindset and being resourceful also aid in carrying out the LAC. This matches the strategy used by P9, in which s/he adjusted his/her hectic schedule to meet the demands of the LAC implementation.

For years, a teacher’s ability to properly manage his/her time has been positively linked to the quality of teaching performance. In fact, the study of Khan (2016) revealed that teachers’ ability to apply lesson planning techniques in the classroom was found effective for their class performance because of effective time management. Due to this, it was suggested that time management skills should be included in training programs for teachers to improve professionally. However, problems with time management may occur if teachers are given vast amounts of workload that they cannot handle. This is proven by the study of Gul et al. (2021), who cited that increased workload decreases teachers’ time management skills.

4.2.2. Flexible Schedule

Another theme that occurred in the analysis was the implementation of a flexible schedule among teachers. The strategy posed that implementing an adaptable schedule for teachers would make the LAC sessions more effective.

“The school can consider flexible scheduling for LAC meetings. It allows teachers to participate without disrupting their regular teaching duties. It can be evening, or weekend sessions may be more convenient for some teachers.” (P7)

“To cope up the demands in participating in LAC, teachers will use their time during weekends in order to not to disrupt classes.” (P10)

According to P7 and P10, the school can opt for flexible scheduling of LAC meetings. This will allow teachers to actively participate in professional development initiatives without disrupting their regular teaching duties. Due to the busy workload of teachers, LAC sessions should be conducted during evenings or weekends to avoid further class disruptions. However, this could mean overextension of work duties as the hours suggested do not anymore encompass the recommended work hours, posing teachers with risks of higher psychological stress levels (Furihata et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Peer collaboration

Another theme in the study was the need for teachers to collaborate in a peer setting. Three respondents highlighted the importance of peer collaboration in implementing the LAC sessions.

“Seeking collaborative solutions, having a positive attitude, and focusing on the main objectives.” (P2)

“Find help from the group of teachers and another professional group to solve existing problems.” (P3)

“Seek assistance to the person or group who can help you to overcome the struggles you faced.” (P4)

“Listen to colleagues. Understand their perspective and challenges. Recognize and understand that everyone faces difficulties. Show empathy and understanding toward fellow educators.” (P7)

P2 suggested that seeking collaborative solutions, having a positive attitude, and focusing on the LAC’s main objectives are among the solutions in properly implementing professional development efforts. This coincides with the suggestion of P3, where s/he is recommended to find help from groups of teachers and other professional groups to solve problems in school. Meanwhile, P4 suggested that listening to colleagues and understanding their experiences and challenges could lead to a more collaborative approach to solving problems. Moreover, doing so would make teachers more empathetic and understanding towards each other in the school community. According to the study by Johnston and Tsai (2018), schools that provide appropriate teacher support are more likely to attract and retain effective teachers. Moreover, the study found that collaboration among teachers can provide opportunities for them to engage in informal mentoring from more experienced colleagues.

4.3 Insights

4.3.1 Teachers must be Open to New Ideas

Among the themes that emerged from the research study was teachers’ open-mindedness to new ideas. The study participants agreed that having an open mind helps properly implement the Learning Action Cells.

“Be open-minded to accept new strategies and methods in order to achieve quality education.” (P6)

“Teachers must be willing to listen and learn during LAC sessions.” (P9)

Based on the response of P6, open-mindedness paves the way for implementing new strategies and methods so teachers and students can achieve quality education. This is in congruence with the insight given by P9, who suggested that teachers must be willing to listen and learn during the LAC sessions. The attributes of listening to key concepts and ideas and having a welcoming attitude to new learning signify the quality of being open-minded. In the study of Abass (2023), it has been recommended that school administrators organize educational conferences and seminars that would help develop teachers’ beliefs and ideas to raise teachers’ levels of open-mindedness. This, in turn, could help elevate the quality of education students receive.

4.3.2 LAC is Useful for Professional Development

Another theme from the study's findings was the Learning Action Cell’s usefulness in helping teachers develop professionally. Educators have acknowledged that teaching is a career of life-long learning. That said, the importance of opportunities for professional development should be made available for educators to evolve and improve further. Below are the responses of the participants:

“LAC sessions are useful for the personal and professional development of the teachers.” (P2)

“LAC sessions enable the teacher to grow professionally, develop positive relationships among teachers, and collaboratively learn the topics.” (P10)

P2 says LAC sessions are helpful for personal and professional growth. The initiative serves as a cost-efficient platform that hones and manages the pedagogical effectiveness of teachers and addresses the gaps in instructional delivery. Since the LAC sessions offer opportunities for needs assessment, it is critical for teachers’ professional development (Culajara, 2023). Meanwhile, P10 has also agreed that the LAC sessions aid teachers in growing professionally. Through the LAC sessions, teachers can likewise develop positive relationships among their peers, thus paving the way for a more collaborative way of learning the topics. Another theme that occurred in the analysis was the implementation of a flexible schedule among teachers. The strategy posed that implementing an adaptable schedule for teachers would make the LAC sessions more effective.

“The school can consider flexible scheduling for LAC meetings. It allows teachers to participate without disrupting their regular teaching duties. It can be evening, or weekend sessions may be more convenient for some teachers.” (P7)

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