

Sustainability of Professional Learning Communities in Chinese High Schools

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Abstract:

This study utilized the explanatory sequential mixed method design in investigating the sustainability of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in selected Chinese high schools. It assessed the current status of PLC sustainability in terms of organizational influence, leadership, professionalism, learning capacity, and sense of community. The quantitative finding of the study was followed up with qualitative inquiry aimed at explaining outlier assessments of PLC sustainability.

Keywords: Teachers' Professional Learning Community, Sustainability

Introduction

One of the paths toward quality education is the teachers' professional development. It has long been recognized universally that teachers' professional development is important in the improvement of classroom instruction, however, access to it is still limited. According to the 2021 Education International report on the status of teachers worldwide, free, accessible, and meaningful continuing professional development is still difficult to get [1]. The mentioned needs for teachers' professional development can be addressed by the professional learning community (PLC). According to Hu et al. [2], after decades of PLC development, they are recognized now as one of the most effective approaches for promoting the professional development of teachers.

PLCs are groups of teachers sharing and critically examining their practice in a collaborative manner [3]. As an effective strategy to facilitate teacher learning, the concept and development of professional learning continues to gain attention. Studies conducted by Burns et al., [4], Dogan et al.[5], Qiao et al.[6], and Luyten & Bazo, [7] have shown consistently that well-developed PLCs can significantly contribute to teacher learning and professional development which ultimately promotes student learning.

PLCs in China are rooted in China's collectivist culture [8]. In broader concepts, Chua et al. [9] described PLC practice as peer mentoring, sharing of professional practices, and professional development courses. Even though PLC is proven for the development of teachers and the academic excellence of students [10], it can only be effective if it is conducted continuously [11]. To sustain PLCs, many barriers have to be overcome. According to Zhang et al. [12], Chinese administrators and teachers considered insufficient timing, unsupportive school leadership, poor financial power, unfavorable accountability system, the lack of collaborative culture among teachers, and external resource crisis as challenges to the sustainable implementation of PLC. In addition, the overwhelming workload for teachers and the lack of a thorough understanding of the PLC concept and implementation are considered barriers also [13]. Chua et al. [9]

confirmed the mentioned barriers in their study of PLC in a Chinese school. They added misconceptions about PLC and lack of supervision from the authority as additional challenges hindering PLC.

For PLC to be sustainable, Sjoer et al. [14] recommended that the people involved must be committed and competent in performing their roles. The level of PLC sustainability has to be monitored from time to time. Knowing the level of PLC sustainability will help schools in making it a continuous program. It has to be remembered, however, that PLC development and sustainability are context-based. In terms of sustainability, the PLC model recently developed by Hu et al. [2] based on the study involving Chinese K-12 schools is the best fit for China's context so far. Their model is composed of the following constructs: organizational influence, leadership, professionalism, and sense of community.

In recent years no study in China has attempted to make a quantitative measure of PLC sustainability. It is part of the large research gap on PLC in China [15],[6]. By tackling this research gap, the study attempted to present quantifiable evidence of PLC sustainability in Chinese high schools. At the same time, it provided deeper insights into the sustainability level of PLCs.

The study was anchored on the Sustainability Organizational Culture Theory (SOCT) developed by Ketprapakorn and Kantabutra [16]. The theory posits that the sustainability of an organization is dependent on its culture. An organization should have a culture of sustainability for it to become continuous. Furthermore, the theory tells that sustainability has a certain set of values that need to be nurtured through appropriate people management practice.

Method

The study was conducted in four selected high schools in Chongzhou City in China in 2023. Out of the 200 total teachers in the selected schools, 132 were randomly selected as respondents. For the qualitative part, ten (10) teachers were selected as participants. Five of them were those who gave the lowest rating to the PLC sustainability, while the other five were the ones who gave the highest. This method of purposively selecting the participants in the qualitative part of the study based on their survey scores is a procedure introduced by Draucker et al. [17].

The survey questionnaire for measuring the level of PLC sustainability in the study was developed by the researcher based on Hu et al.'s [2] model. It was validated and pilot-tested. The computed Cronbach alphas for the different sub-variables of PLC sustainability are 0.91 (organizational influence), 0.91 (leadership), 0.91 (professionalism), 0.91 (learning capacity), 0.89 (sense of community). The survey was conducted using an online platform. For the qualitative part, interviews were used to collect data that would possibly explain the salient quantitative findings. The interviews revolved around the experiences of the participants related to the different domains of sustainability. Doing this explained the status of PLC sustainability in terms of the different domains.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Assessment of PLC Sustainability

Domains	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Organizational Influence	3.44	0.59	Sustainable
Leadership	3.47	0.58	Sustainable
Professionalism	3.44	0.59	Sustainable
Learning Capacity	3.45	0.55	Sustainable
Sense of Community	3.51	0.49	Highly Sustainable

Overall	3.46		Sustainable
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Table 1 shows that PLC is sustainable based on the overall mean of 3.46. It is sustainable in all its dimensions except for the sense of community which is considered highly sustainable. The organizational influence which provides PLCs with supporting policies and structure is well in place. The PLC leaders were considered effective in knowledge sharing, decision-making, and promoting shared values. Both the PLC leaders and members show professionalism. They are committed to improving students' learning and to the best practices in PLC operation. They also exercise professional judgment on PLC issues. The learning capacity of PLCs is also evident. The PLC members are reflective learners, open-minded, and active in collaborative inquiries. On the other hand, a sense of community is the most sustainable aspect of PLC with the highest mean of 3.51. The sense of community manifested in the members' observance of standards, trust, respect, collegiality, and emotional bonding.

The findings are similar to reports from different studies. The organizational influence in PLCs is sustainable due to the Chinese government's support [18] and the school's administrative backing [19]. PLC leadership is also assisted by Chinese school principals which result in the commitment of teachers [20]. According to Zheng et al. [21], teacher leaders are also capable of sustaining PLC through shared vision and collaboration, virtues, and role modeling. The learning capacity of PLC is seen from the teachers' practice of reflective reading, reflection on practices, and reflections on one self's teaching experience. [22]. Lastly, PLCs in China provide emotional bonds among stakeholders. Likewise, there is development and communication for a shared vision, culture of trust, collegial learning, and shared responsibility spearheaded by school leaders [23].

The thematic analysis resulted in two sets of themes. The first set of themes explains why some PLCs are highly sustainable. The themes are school support, leadership strategies, enthusiastic learning, openness to collaboration, collegiality, and emotional bonds. As to school support, the participants narrated that their school provided professional development through the PLC. The school administrators also involve PLC leaders in formulating policies for teacher improvement. The theme leadership pertains to the effective pursuit of the PLC goal which is professional development using collaboration. Enthusiastic learning describes the professionalism of PLC members in terms of dedication to learning and providing support to peers. Furthermore, the participants claimed that their PLCs are highly sustainable because of collegiality and emotional bonds. The collective support, shared responsibility, respect, and close connections among members and leaders are strong.

The other set of themes explains why some of the PLCs are not sustainable. The themes are poor management procedure, shortsighted leadership, half-hearted participation, disorganized learning process, and incohesion. PLCs are not sustainable because the management is plagued by inconsistent decisions and a lack of cooperation among members. The leaders also lacked long-term plans and foresight. The PLC is also unsustainable because of the half-hearted participation of members who simply do tasks for the sake of completion, and for credit also. The selfishness of some PLC members, and the lack of structure for mentoring led to a disorganized learning process which weakens the PLC also. The unsustainability of PLCs is also attributed to incohesion among members due to conflicts and personal interests.

Conclusion

The study has shown that PLC sustainability is attainable. It can be done by strengthening organizational influence, leadership, professionalism, learning capacity, and sense of community. The support from the

school administrators is vital to the sustainability of PLCs but the most important is the collaborative culture in the organization.

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