Professional Learning Community: A Study of Teachers' Perceptions in Pakistan

By

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Abstract

The study highlights the perception of teachers on Professional Learning Community. Professional Learning Community (PLC) focuses on learning rather teaching, collaborative work and holding teachers accountable for results. PLC ensures that students learn, teachers create a culture of collaboration and the focus is on results. For this, quantitative research approach was used. A standardized questionnaire on Professional Learning Community designed by Huffman was selected for data collection. The questionnaire has five sections based on the five major dimensions of PLC which are shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, shared personal practice and supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures). A total of 100 teachers were taken as sample after pilot testing. Five hypotheses were constructed on the five dimensions of PLC and were tested through regression analysis. The results show that the teachers although having a collaborative environment are unaware of the Professional Learning Community. They are reluctant in accepting the feedback from their staff and colleagues. They preferred to work in isolation rather having a shared knowledge. Assessments are for learning; however, teachers accepted that learning is restricted to marks only. When putting into practice, PLC can be seen as a positive experience for all stake holders.

Introduction

Nuts and bolts to develop learning have led researchers to test learning theories on empirical grounds to reach any convincing break through. In this scenario teacher holds central position. Developing teachers professionally has been the crust of educational systems in the world, which aims at easing the process of learning for the students. Professional Learning Community (PLC) is an effort which has its 'focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold accountable for results' Richard Du Four (2004). PLC constituents are: a class wise teaching team, a school committee, a school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, and/or a national professional organization.

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PLC's underpinning idea is learning that is the shared purpose of a school for achieving aligned objectives. In a country like Pakistan with meager resources, PLC can prove useful as mostly the government can't satisfy educational needs of the people. People have the desire, on the other hand, to get their children educated. Beating both hands is not resulting in encouraging output. This reason necessitates for PLC, a newly discovered area in the professional learning of teachers.

In the world of education, schools and school districts aim to establish PLC such that educators can help support vision, mission, and goals of the school. A professional learning community is developed in many different forms, be it from staff committees, learning teams, and collaborating meetings. Achieving a PLC within a school can be challenging. A PLC can cause positive change efforts when all members work with one another to meet the desired goals and tasks, however, ineffective PLC can cause educators to advice to deviate from the goal of working together for the success of students. While the school is considered a place where the classroom teachers, parents, students, support staff, administrators are responsible for the success of student learning, the challenges presented may prevent individuals in helping to make important contributions to school culture, school goals and ultimately student learning (Sunddip, 2010).

When trying to achieve a school goal, staff members and administrators should explore innovative professional development opportunities together. Professional development related to the school goal will allow staff members to a chance for professional and personal growth through such experiences. Follow-up staff discussions should be embedded such that faculty can openly collaborate, discuss and reflect on the in-service training or professional development. (Sparks, 1983.)

According to Du Four and Eaker (1998), all work towards PLC comprises potentially difficult tasks. Communities must be based on environment built on trust, effective communication, clear goals and objectives, with strong and sure administrative support, before much productive work can be accomplished (Riley and Stoll, 2004). The four pillars of an effective learning community are mission, vision, values and goals. The mission should be an inspirational, concisely written statement of what the school stands for (Hulley, 2004). A schools vision statement outlines what the organisation aspires to become. It offers motivation and hope for a community that is working towards attaining an ideal (Huffman, 2003). value statements outline what the community members are committees to In order to ensure school improvement (Barth, 1990).

The educational system of Pakistan needs attempts to uplift the teaching standards of the teachers. Huge amount of money has already been invested but with least outcomes. PLC is economical in implication as only teachers' collaboration and coordination is required for sharing experiences and knowledge. Hence concepts develop over a period of time, which may yield desired outcome. As stated by Ezell, Klein and Lee (2010), "Overall, everyone involved in learning community has a common goal to create optimal learning environments for children, everyone benefits from the shared vision" (p.8).

Significance of the study

The purpose of the paper is to describe the characteristics of a professional learning community, the leadership roles of the principle and the roles of teachers in a school's professional learning community. It is the researcher's intent to investigate the effectiveness of the five dimensions featuring the core characteristics of a professional learning community and the roles of the principal and teachers in it.

The examination of professional learning communities in this research paper is guided by five research questions.

   i.   What are the characteristics of a shared and supportive leadership in a PLC?
  ii.   What is the role of shared values and vision in a PLC?
 iii.   What is the effectiveness of collective learning and application in a PLC?
  iv.   What is the impact of shared personal practice in a PLC?
   v.   How does the supportive condition in a PLC promote students learning?

Methodology

For this specific research, the researcher has selected the Quantitative research approach. The researcher conducted survey .For the Quantitative study, selected items from the questionnaire designed by Huffman (2003) was used as the data collection tool. A sample of n=100 teachers from public and private sectors elementary schools were randomly selected.

Data collection procedure

The selected questionnaire's reliability was 0.81. The tool was first pilot tested and was later given to 100 teachers form public and private sectors elementary schools. The teachers were elected through random sampling. The instrument was divided into five sections having nine items each on the five dimensions of professional learning community. The responses of the respondents were analysed through regression analysis.

Results

- The results show that there is a positive relationship between shared and supportive leadership in a school of professional learning community. However some teachers seem to be unaware of its presence in their schools.

- The results show that there is a positive relationship between the shared values and vision of a school in a professional learning community. However, some of the teachers disagreed by stating that the shared values and visions of the school are made by the higher authorities and they do not have any say in it.

- The results also show that there is a positive relationship between collective learning and application of knowledge. However, few teachers were of the opinion that although collective learning and application exist, the teachers are not given a chance to share and implement new learning's on their own. Stakeholders are not actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase students' achievements.

- For shared personal practice and development, the result shows that more than half of the teachers of the public and private sector gave their opinion in favoring the dimension of a professional learning community. They accepted that professional development focuses on teaching and learning. The school staff is committed to programs that enhance learning and stakeholders also participates in applying new knowledge to solve problems. Opportunities exist to a greater extent for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement. The staff also provides feedback to peers related to instructional practices. However, some teachers disagreed with this idea. For them, there was no concrete sharing of ideas and suggestions for improving students learning. Very few opportunities, in fact, almost negligible opportunities are available for coaching and mentoring. A culture of mistrust and disrespect prevail in their schools. No rewards are given for outstanding achievements of the teachers by their management.

- The results show that there is little positive relationship between shared personal practice and professional development in a school of professional learning community. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice. Monetary resources are available for professional development of the teachers. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff. Resource people also provide expertise and support for continues learning. However, almost half of the teachers disagreed with the fact that a smooth communication system flows in the school. The proximity of grade

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level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues and the communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including central office personnel, parents and community members.

Findings

The findings of the research show that the teachers are quite unaware of the dimensions of the professional learning community; however, the teachers were of the view that most of the activities which they carry out in a school are a part of a professional learning community.

- The statistics show that 82% of the teachers showed their confidence on their principals' leaderships and stated that there is a continuous support given by their principals in their professional development and well being of the students. They were of the view that opportunities are provided to them for healthy cooperation and decision making at their ends. Rewards and acknowledgements are also given to teachers by their principals of their good work in their field. However 18% of the teachers of both the public and private sector had a completely different opinion on the principal's leadership and practices. According to them no support is provided to them and there is no supportive leadership.

- For the question of shared values and vision 77% of the teachers of public and private sector stated that they were aware of the shared values and vision of the school. There exists a collaborative process for developing shared sense of values among staff in their schools. Visions are also shared for school improvement and sense of responsibility also prevails amongst the staff members. However, the remaining 23% of the teachers were of the opinion that in the formation of the shared vision, mission and values of the school, there is no say of the teachers and the values and missions are made by the higher authorities.

- For collective learning and collaboration, 91% teachers of the public and private sector stated that the staff work together to seek knowledge, skills, strategies for improved learning of their students. They were of the view that collegial relationship exists among staff that reflects commitment to school improvement efforts. The staff plan and also work together to search for solutions to address diverse students' needs. The remaining 9% of the teachers were of the view that although collective learning and application exist, the teachers are not given a chance to share and implement new learning's on their own. Stakeholders are not actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase students' achievements.

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- For shared personal practice and development, 64% of the teachers of the public and private sector gave their opinion in favoring the dimension of a professional learning community. They accepted that professional development focuses on teaching and learning. The school staff is committed to programs that enhance learning and stakeholders also participates in applying new knowledge to solve problems. Opportunities exist to a greater extent for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement. The staff also provides feedback to peers related to instructional practices. However, 36% of the teachers disagreed with this idea. For them, there was no concrete sharing of ideas and suggestions for improving students learning. Very few opportunities, in fact, almost negligible opportunities are available for coaching and mentoring. A culture of mistrust and disrespect prevail in their schools. No rewards are given for outstanding achievements of the teachers by their management.

- On the questions of supportive conditions in the schools, 59% of the teachers strongly agreed with the idea that in their schools time is provided for to facilitate collaborative work. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice. Monetary resources are available for professional development of the teachers. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff. Resource people also provide expertise and support for continues learning. However, the remaining 41% of the teachers disagreed with the fact that a smooth communication system flows in the school. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues and the communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including central office personnel, parents and community members.

Conclusion

A professional learning community depends upon shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of knowledge, shared personal practice and development and supportive conditions. It promotes collaboration and students learning. In some of the schools this idea is present to a greater extent; however, in few, this concept is almost negligibly present. The teachers of the school are already involved in carrying out the activities of a professional learning community without knowing the concept. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a need to promote a healthy collaborative environment in the schools to promote students learning.

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