

Professional Learning Communities in Malaysian Schools: A Contemporary Literature Review

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Abstract Most professional learning community or PLC studies were often conducted in the Western context. Hence, this literature review study aims to analyze PLC studies among primary and secondary schools in Malaysia between 2009 and 2018. The sources for the data collection process were obtained through searches on Google Scholar pages, Malaysian Citation Index (MyCite), and Scopus using the identified keywords, which are 'professional learning community', 'school', and 'Malaysia'. As a result, 35 empirical studies on PLC have been identified based on the set criteria through published journal articles and seminar papers. A scoping review through a narrative synthesis of the selected literatures, there are five main themes; PLC research methodology, PLC characteristics, PLC practices, the role of higher learning institution researchers, and PLC issues. There have been positive developments in PLC in terms of research and practice. However, the amount of local PLC studies is scarce compared to the Western context. A more robust empirical research is needed to implement PLCs in Malaysia.

Keywords Malaysia, School, Professional Learning Communities, Professional Development

1. Introduction

The professional learning community (PLC) is a professional development strategy implemented in most countries according to different contexts nowadays (Pang & Wang, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that PLCs positively impacted teachers' professional development and school improvement (Harris et al., 2017). In addition, the structure of PLC as a platform for teachers' involvement in a professional dialogue improves their pedagogy of teaching, contributing to the increase of student achievement (Bakar & Jamian, 2016). This

indicates that PLC is capable of developing teachers' capacity and schools as a learning organization (Kools & Stolls, 2016).

Furthermore, various PLC terms have been proposed by scholars because of its loose concept (Lomos, 2017). Little did a preliminary study of PLC among teachers in 1982 by dubbing it as cohesion (Lomos, 2017). Afterwards, Rosenholtz's study (1989) provided the term collaboration. Other than that, several terms came to surface such as professional community (Louis et al., 1996), learning community (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006), professional learning community/PLC (Hord, 1997), and professional learning network (Colwell & Hutchison, 2018).

Although there are various terms, PLC remains as the umbrella concept that represents different types of community, for instance the learning community, learning community network, and community practitioners (Vangrieken et al., 2015). However, international scholars have agreed that PLC is a group of people who share and critically discuss on reflective teaching practices, collaboration, inclusiveness, and continuous improvement (Valckx et al., 2019). The five characteristics of PLC that form the community are the sharing of values and vision, collective responsibility, collaborative teachers, supported and shared leadership and supportive structure (Stoll & Louis, 2007). These features have made the PLC model multidimensional due to its ability to gauge individual capacity, interpersonal capacity and organizational capacity (Slegers et al., 2013).

Efforts to implement PLCs are actively being carried out by educators in most schools in Malaysia. The implementation of PLC in underperforming schools selected by the Ministry of Education started in 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011). The initial PLC formation strategy was a lessons study. Furthermore, in 2012, the PLC strategy was diversified, and the number of schools being selected increases. Even the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 launched by the Ministry of

Education in 2013, has rendered PLC as one of its professional development strategies to improve the overall quality of teachers and education (Ministry of Education, 2014).

In line with the development of PLC implementations in Malaysia, more studies on PLC were carried out by local researchers. Similar efforts have been made by international researchers to find empirical evidence according to their locality as most of the literatures on PLC focuses more on Western context (Hairon & 2012 Dimmock). This topic is significant because the implementation, form and functions of PLC vary according to the context of a country (Pang & Wang, 2016). Thus, the question arises, what is the form and process of PLC implementations in Malaysia? Therefore, this contemporary literature review is done to provide an understanding of how PLC process is implemented in the context of Malaysia.

This study will analyze the literatures on PLC models and methodologies conducted by local researchers. In addition, this study will identify existing PLC issues and gaps for future studies. Based on local literatures, five main themes are highlighted below.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this literature review is to understand the scenario of PLC in Malaysia. This review uses a narrative synthesis approach (Gough, 2007). A narrative synthesis approach was chosen because it allows the reviewer to answer questions related to the topic being studied and integrate the findings (Gough, 2007). The process commences with filtering irrelevant articles, plot the findings, and synchronize the findings to a conclusion. Some aspects of the article have been identified such as the PLC research methodology used, the context of the study and their findings. Therefore, the article's search criteria are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The search criteria

Content	Description
Title	Professional Learning Community in Malaysia
Date published	2009 to 2018
Scope of study	Government's primary and secondary School
Location of study	All states in Malaysia
Publishing type	Journals, seminar papers

According to Table 1, the span of years set during article search was from 2009 to 2018. The main objective of this time limit was chosen to obtain the latest published PLC articles in Malaysia over the last decade.

The review process involves several steps. The first step is to find articles containing the topic of professional learning community in Malaysia through search engines such as *Google Scholar*, *Malaysian Citation Index (MyCite)*, and *Scopus*. The keywords used are; '*Komuniti Pembelajaran Profesional*' AND Malaysia; '*Komuniti Pembelajaran Profesional*' AND sekolah; 'Professional Learning Communities' AND Malaysia; 'Professional Community' AND Malaysia. The initial search through Scopus and Malaysian Citation Index (MyCite) search engines have resulted in few numbers of articles to be analyzed. Therefore, the researchers further their search through another search engine, the Google Scholar. There were more articles, but they needed to be filter thoroughly.

Consequently, this review focused on studies conducted in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, PLC studies encompassing higher learning institutions and other than educational organizations were excluded because they were beyond the scope of this paper. PLC articles that were published in newspapers, blogs, websites and theses were also excluded. PLC sources from these were excluded as local articles are the result of or part of the theses findings. Thus, only articles published in journals and seminar papers that contain empirical evidence were all selected for the narrative analysis.

Thereafter, all selected articles were read carefully. Information on the articles' author names, titles, date published, objective of study, methodology, and findings were recorded systematically in Excel worksheet. Then, the synchronized findings were discussed in the next section.

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3. Results and Discussions

This section discusses the findings resulted from review of local PLC researches. At the beginning of the PLC search through search engines, 160 articles were generated. However, after each article was assessed, only 35 articles (18 in Malay and 17 in English) met the criteria set by the reviewers. Based on the review analysis, there are five main themes; PLC research methodology, PLC characteristics, PLC practice, the role of higher learning institution researchers, and PLC issues.

3.1. PLC Research Methodology

Based on the 35 reviewed articles, the average publication for a period of 10 years is 3.5 articles a year. The number of articles published each year is shown in Figure 1.

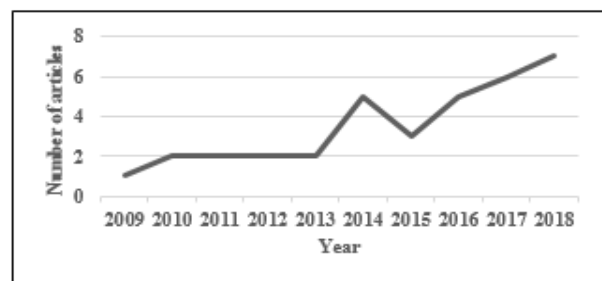


Figure 1. The number of published PLC articles in Malaysia (2009-2018)

According to Figure 1, the number of published articles has escalated from 2009 to 2018. The increment reflects the ongoing interest of local researchers regarding PLC implementation in schools. Overall, 31 articles came from local studies while the other four articles were written by international researchers.

The PLC methods of investigation have various approaches; some studies are quantitative, qualitative or mixed in nature. Most quantitative research method has adapted models and instruments from the West to identify the dimensions of PLC and the level of PLC practices implementation in schools (e.g. Abdullah & Ahmad, 2009; Mohamad et al., 2015). However, Ismail et al.'s (2018) study has adapted their PLC instrument to focus on Malay teaching subjects built by local expertise through Delphi technique. In the case of qualitative studies, most of them explored the process of implementing PLCs. Studies that applied mixed methods used the qualitative approach to support the findings from their quantitative procedure. Based on Figure 2, the methodologies used in PLC studies were 15 (42%) quantitative, 16 (46%) qualitative, and 4 (11%) mixed methods. The data collection procedures for qualitative PLC studies included interviews, observations, and document analyses whereas quantitative studies used survey technique. Meanwhile, PLC studies that used a mixed method approach have combined both methodologies by conducting surveys, interviews, and experiments.

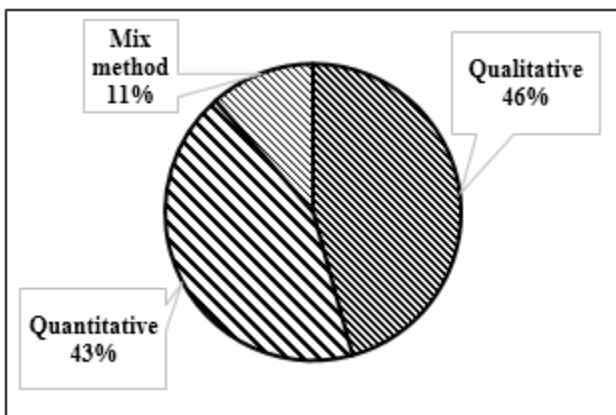


Figure 2. PLC research methodology

3.2. PLC Characteristics

According to the reviews of PLC articles, there are two types of PLC; school-based PLC (n = 28:78%), and online-based PLC (n = 7:20%). School-based PLC involves formal or informal teacher learning activities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Teacher learning activities include teaching studies, action studies, peer-coaching, learning walks, and teaching supervision. Meanwhile, online-based PLC focuses more on professional job discussions online.

Studies have shown that the local school-based PLC

characteristics were similar to Western PLCs. For example, Abdullah et al. (2012) have identified PLC characteristics in 50 secondary schools in Malaysia (i.e. leadership sharing and leadership support, sharing of values, goals, mission and vision, collective learning and applications, personal sharing practices and supportive situations). They have also identified the stages of the PLC implementation based on the initial stage, intermediate stage, and the practice stage. The schools that were identified to have every effective and continuous PLC characteristic are categorized into the practice stage.

In addition, several other PLC characteristics include focus on student learning, collaborative culture, decision-making, and reflective dialogue. Although the PLC implementation policy was only launched by the government in 2011, the philosophy behind PLC characteristics were found to have existed in the launch of Action Research Module in 1995 (Ministry of Education, 2008) for teachers to apply during their action research. Through the project, teachers were able to solve problems that arise from daily practices by reflecting individually or as a team to improve teaching practices and enhance their students' performance.

As for online-based PLCs, the practices include collaborative learning using online technology such as the internet and social media (Trust et al., 2016). In line with Western literatures, the theory of community practice is commonly found in online-based PLC studies (Feger & Arruda, 2008). This form of learning community leans more towards the informal side and is built on the teachers' own initiative in Malaysia. Among the examples of online-based PLC studies are through ITC online community (Khalid, 2011), Facebook (Khalid et al., 2013), and blogs (Murugaiah et al., 2010; Nambiar et al., 2011). Their studies comply with the characteristics of PLC based on practitioner community's theory of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire that are capable of enhancing teachers' professional development (Nambiar et al., 2011).

In addition, several other PLC structure studies related to leadership (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2014), teachers' self-efficacy (Ismail et al., 2015), Malay teaching subjects (Abdullah et al., 2018), English teaching subjects (Roselan, 2018; Ansawi & Pang, 2017), teachers' competency (Rusdin & Ambutton, 2018; Bakar & Jamian, 2016; Thani & Othman, 2017), teachers' readiness level (Khusaini, 2018; Mazlan & Mahamod, 2016), teachers based on specific subjects (Ngau & Mansor, 2017), school culture (Yaakob & Yunus, 2016) and learning walks strategy (Ahmad et al., 2018).

3.3. PLC Practices

In general, PLC practice studies include schools located in Peninsular Malaysia and the Borneo (i.e. Sabah and Sarawak). The types of school included are national

primary school, Chinese national school, high-performing national school, secondary school, high-performing secondary school, national religious high school, full boarding secondary school, transformation school, and trustee school. Most studies measure the level of PLC practice in schools using different scale instruments. The majority of findings from quantitative studies have indicated that the level of PLC practice in school is high.

However, the levels of practice between schools were found to be different according to the type of school, band or school performance, and location (Wang et al., 2017). For example, Ismail et al. (2018) found that the practice level of each dimension differs between trustee school, transformation school, and high prestige school. In comparing between high and low prestige schools, the level of PLC practice in high prestige schools is higher than the lower ones (Ismail et al., 2014). In fact, Chong et al.'s (2017) study of SJKC high prestige school in Sarawak revealed a high level of PLC practice.

In terms of location, the level of PLC practice in schools situated in rural areas was only moderate (Aripin & Hamzah, 2017). The difference in the level of PLC practice between school locations may be due to the lack of school structures that supported PLC (Ansawi & Pang, 2017). In addition, the size of a PLC group in school may influence the level of PLC practice. A study by Chuan et al. (2013) found that the ideal size for a PLC group formation is around four to six people.

The practice of PLCs in Malaysian education system is currently considered to be top-down. However, the Ministry of Education Malaysia strives to transform the structure of PLC practices bottom-up by making it one of the proclaimed self-professional developments, which gives autonomy to school administrators and schoolteachers to implement it in schools.

3.4. The Role of Higher Learning Institution Researchers

Studies have found that higher learning institution researchers play a role in supporting the formation of PLC among schoolteachers (Hord & Tobia, 2012). For example, a group of lecturers used teaching study strategies involving instructors and schoolteachers to assist them in forming PLC in school (Iksan et al., 2014). The result of that PLC formation had a positive impact on the teaching and learning process of teachers. In addition, efforts to improve PLCs using the developmental instructional supervision approach was carried out by Abdullah et al. (2016) to improve the quality of Malay subject. Furthermore, lecturers from teaching institutes have helped to promote the implementation of PLC in schools, especially using teaching study strategy as practice that can enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Chuan et al., 2013).

Correspondingly, online-based PLCs became the focus

for university researchers to propagate PLC. This online-based collaboration of online teacher learning is informal and structurally bottom-up (Khalid et al., 2013). The efforts to explore professional development online were executed by university researchers such as Murugaiah et al. (2010) and Thang et al. (2010). They found that the involvement of teachers within the community added value to the improvement of their teaching skills and to enhance their competencies. However, the extent of how effective online-based PLCs can be as a strategy for the development of teachers' professionalism in Malaysia is unclear. This practice as a strategy is still indistinct because empirical studies on online-based PLCs are minimal compared to school-based PLCs.

3.5. PLC Issues

Several factors were identified during the review to prevent the formation of PLC implementation. The factors that can contribute or hinder the success of a PLC formation as stated by Sargent and Hannum (2009) are institutions in the education system, leadership characteristics, and the teachers themselves.

The first factor is the institution in the education system; referring to the school structure. A school's structure includes the time and space allocated for teachers to collaborate, workloads, and contextual factors (Thang et al., 2010). Studies by Thang et al. (2010), Rahim et al. (2015), and David et al. (2014) have proved that time is one of the main obstacles to forming PLCs in school. Workloads equally affect the implementation of PLCs in school. In fact, workload is a factor that is consistently found in PLC studies such as Rahim et al. (2015), Abdullah et al. (2016), Yaakob et al. (2017), Saad et al. (2017), and Chong et al. (2018).

Subsequently, the issue of high job pressure caused by certain policies has been discussed by international scholars such as Harris and Jones (2018). They believed that a strategy that is adapted from abroad should consider the local context and cultural background. This issue should be considered because PLC is the basis of training adapted from overseas (Mohamad et al., 2015). If the implementation of PLC does not meet the requirement of a local context, it may have an unexpected impact on the country's education system.

The second critical factor is leadership in PLC. Some studies have found the lack of competence among school leaders in implementing PLC in school. For example, Chong et al. (2018) found several leadership characteristics that prevented the practice of PLC in schools such as being less open-minded, less innovative, and autocratic. In addition, Mohamad et al. (2015) recommended that the Ministry of Education Malaysia improve the knowledge of school leaders as they were found to be less competent in starting PLCs in school.

The third factor is identified to be the teacher's own

attitude. Abdullah et al. (2016) found that the teacher's attitude prevents the implementation of PLC. This factor is likely caused by the teacher's lack of understanding of PLC concept, which then hinders the process of PLC implementation. Teachers were also said to be embarrassed to be perceived by others (Mazlan & Mahamod, 2016). In addition, the lack of motivation has caused teachers to feel weak and lack a sense of belonging during school (Chong et al., 2018). The sense of belonging or cohesion between teachers is an important trait for a PLC to operate effectively (Stoll & Louis, 2007). Cohesion enables teachers to discuss openly in order to improve or enhance teaching practices in their classroom.

Another known factor to hinder the implementation of PLC in schools is the culture of that particular community. Scholars have been debating about cultures in their studies as there are differences between the western and eastern cultures. For example, the sharing of teaching practices in the West is carried out publicly and is widely available to colleagues regardless of age and work experience. However, Khalid et al. (2014) found that teachers did not fully share their practices with the community because they are afraid that their knowledge and skills are being perceived as condescending. Murugaiah et al. (2012) similarly found the same issue, which shows that modest cultures exist among teachers. The study also found that older and experienced teachers tend to have high dignity and confidence.

As a result, senior teachers cannot accept negative comments or feedbacks from younger and less experienced teachers. They perceived that younger teachers should respect them; thus, it is clear that a hierarchy exists within the teachers' community (Zawawi, 2008; Abdullah et al., 2016). Zawawi (2008) also described that the Malay community uses a 'sugar-coated' language while socializing with others. In most situations, it is considered inappropriate to be straightforward. Therefore, this condition is contrary to the Western communities. This cultural barrier has been debated by researchers from China, plus, it was one of the characteristics published in the PLC conceptual model developed by Zhang and Sun (2018).

4. Conclusions

This review of literature on PLCs in Malaysian secondary and primary schools in Malaysia gives an overview of PLC within the local context. Although the implementation of PLCs in Malaysia is relatively new, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has been implementing it as one of the reformation strategies for professional development in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PPPM) 2013-2025, which positively influences the progress of PLC in terms of research and practice. However, this review has its limitations. The time span of the included articles was limited between 2009 to 2018 and possibly not all empirical studies on PLC in Malaysia can be detected

by the reviewers. In addition, some methodological aspects in the included articles were not explicitly stated and thus resulting in information shortage to describe the study in depth.

Therefore, two recommendations are proposed so future research can be done. First, researchers should conduct more PLC studies because this topic has not been fully explored locally from various perspectives compared to Western studies. A more robust investigation is needed to enhance PLC practices in Malaysia. Secondly, the identified characteristics of PLC were widely adapted from the Western PLC model, which stirred some issues. For that reason, it is recommended that a new PLC model and instrument be developed by local researchers in accordance with the local context to serve as a guide for PLC implementation in schools. In conclusion, the concept of PLC must first be understood and practiced in order to become a professional development strategy and an effective school improvement practice.

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