Leading Professional Learning Communities to Support University Teachers' Continuing Professional Development: Possibilities and Challenges in China

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Abstract. Scholars have focused their attention on teacher development in higher educational institutions (HEIs) as a result of ongoing globalization and educational reforms. Western countries have introduced and employed PLCs into school systems since the 1990s, while in Asian countries like China, the concept is still in its infancy. Based on the analysis of the existing literature on professional learning community (PLC) and continuing teacher development (CPD), this paper explains the role of leadership, especially instructional and distributed leadership, in supporting CPD through the creation of effective PLCs. It discusses the complicated organizational structure of HEIs and specific challenges in Chinese HEIs' PLCs and sheds light on some of the recommendations for Chinese university leaders to develop and sustain effective PLCs.

Keywords: Professional learning community (PLC) · continuing professional development (CPD) · higher educational institutions (HEIs) · distributed leadership

1 Introduction

After the implementation of the No Child Left Behind policy (NCLB) in 2002 in USA, teachers and school leaders faced great challenges since the expectations for student academic improvement increased under the promotion of accountability [1]. It highlighted the importance of teacher change and continuing professional development to respond to instructional change. 'Teachers as learners: Building Communities for Professional Development' was then incorporated into the World Assembly of the International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET) in 2004, revealing the dual identity of the teacher in teaching and learning [2]. The learning community model empowers teachers to share opinions and collaborate in order to improve their teaching practices and, as a result, improve student learning [1]. It is also agreed that it is school leader's responsibility to build a PLC and support teachers CPD to assist them to become lifelong learners [3].

In the era of globalization and educational reforms, the concept and application of 'professional learning communities' (PLCs) became widespread in Western countries

and it has recently gained popularity in Asia [4]. In recent years, there has been increasing attention to teacher collaborations and PLCs among Chinese scholars [5]. Yet, empirical research on the theory and practice of PLCs and the role of educational leadership in it is scarce in Chinese schools, especially in higher educational institutions (HEIs). This article therefore aims to analyze the possible challenges and respective solutions for Chinese university leaders to build and sustain effective PLCs to support teacher CPD.

2 Professional Learning Community (PLC) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

2.1 Continuing Professional Development in HEIs

2.1.1 Definition of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The continuing professional development (CPD) refers to "an on-going process encompassing all formal and informal learning experiences that enable all staff in schools, to think about what they are doing, enhance their knowledge and skills and improve ways of working, thereby enhancing student learning and well-being" [6].

2.1.2 Why Teacher CPD Matters in HEIs

It is commonly agreed that CPD is positively linked to student learning, staff retention and recruitment, teaching quality, as well as school improvement and effectiveness [6, 7]. CPD can also help to sustain and improve teachers' professional standards, as well as provide them with continuing employability [8]. Schools that do not invest in their personnel professional development often lose their outstanding teachers, which can result in expensive costs for recruiting and training new teachers, putting a strain on school finances [6].

Higher education has long been seen as a crucial tool for developing a knowledge-based economy and sustaining economic growth, and it has become more competitive as a result of modern managerialism and international rankings [9]. However, there are a number of unaddressed problems exist in the CPD of professionals in higher educational institutions (HEIs). This is due to the fact that HEIs serve a dual purpose in CPD: they are both a key provider of CPD for other professions and a place for their own staff development [10]. Another problem is that universities put most of the attention on the professional development of academic staff since their major purpose is "academic development", but other staff development is overlooked [10]. In comparison to academic staff, there is a research gap on mentorship, coaching, and career planning chances for other university staff. Recalling the definition of CPD, it highlights the importance of involving all staff in schools, and that CPD has to be seen as a collective and joint responsibility [6]. A "learning-centred community" or "learning organization", which comprises professional learning communities (PLCs) and networked learning communities (NLCs), has become the most widely known platform to support CPD in practice [6, 11]. The following parts of the article will focus on the role of PLCs in supporting CPD in higher education and the leadership for effective PLCs.

2.2 Professional Learning Community (PLC)

2.2.1 Definition and Key Characteristics of PLC

The concept of PLC emerged in the corporate business sector, and in the 1990s, PLC practice in education originated in Anglo-American K-12 school settings that emphasized teacher agency and autonomy [4]. Over the last two decades, due to the globalization, there has been a universal trend to transform schools into PLCs. For instance, the UK's Department for Education and Skills (DfES) declared in 2004 that one of the four professional qualities to which English school principals should be devoted is establishing PLCs and offering CPD [7]. Furthermore, in Asian countries, Singapore's Minister of Education (MOE) implemented the PLC policy in 2009, which successfully resulted in increasing enrollment rates [12]. Although diverse contexts may have varied definitions of PLC, there is a broad international agreement that the term refers to "a group of people who share and critically interrogate their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting manner" [13, 14]. PLC has eight main characteristics that have been summarized through years of educational research, including shared values and vision; collective responsibility; reflective professional inquiry; collaboration; group and individual learning; mutual trust, respect and support; inclusive membership; and openness, networks and partnerships (ibid). Regardless of phase or context, PLCs exhibit the aforementioned eight characteristics to a greater or lesser extent [13].

2.2.2 The Relationship Between PLC and CPD

According to the empirical evidence, PLCs that are well-developed contribute to improving student performance, teacher self-efficacy, and school culture [13, 15]. This is obviously in line with the concept of CPD mentioned in Sect. 2.1.1. One of the four processes by which PLCs are built, managed, and maintained is the proper leadership and management of CPD; PLCs provide practical instruments for CPD through school-based formal professional development opportunities [6]. Teacher CPD is facilitated by participation in PLCs as they perceive a direct link between their own professional development and training opportunities and adjustments in their teaching practices and student learning [16]. The Welsh Assembly Government's new CPD framework for teachers and leaders, announced in 2010, underlined the significance of encouraging CPD through PLCs and other collaborative activities [17]. However, although PLCs is proved to be effective to support teacher CPD and contribute to school improvement and reform [4, 14], it depends on schools with different societal cultures and systems. Next section will introduce the PLCs in the Chinese context and provide reflections on the leadership.

3 Context

3.1 Educational System in China

China, like the majority of Asian countries, has a large power-distance culture and a hierarchical top-down structure within the education system that has typically ensured direct consistency between policy formulation and implementation stages [4].

In China, only students who perform well on the National College Entrance Examination are admitted to top universities. China has undergone educational reforms in recent decades with the goal of transforming a test-oriented educational system into a quality-oriented system. University-School Partnerships (USP) has been utilized as a strategy to enhance teacher quality and sustain CPD in order to achieve the aim. USP means that university experts will visit schools, monitor classroom activities, and give feedback to teachers on how to improve their teaching practices [18]. This approach again reflects the importance of CPD in higher education institutions, as discussed in Sect. 2.1.2.

3.2 The Implementation of PLCs in China

Though the word 'PLCs' is an imported concept in the Chinese context, it has a long history of strengthening teachers' professional competency and development through collective enquiry, such as teaching-research groups (*jiaoyanzu* in Chinese) [19]. After years of exploration and development, PLCs are now institutionalized in the Chinese educational system and it has been proven to be beneficial in disseminating innovative insights among instructors in the 'New Curriculum Reform' since 2001 [20]. However, Chinese PLC characteristics are now mostly modeled on those of the Western countries, and such a disregard for sociocultural factors could lead to potential pitfalls [15]. For instance, accountability and top-down policy execution in the Chinese education system (mentioned in Sect. 3.1) may limit teacher engagement and collaboration, which is detrimental to CPD and PLCs in practice [15, 21]. This can be explained by teachers' fear and hesitation to convey their comments to senior peers in a high power-distance culture [19]. Scholars argue that supportive school leadership is the key to overcome context-specific constraints, promote teacher collaboration, and form effective PLCs; yet, empirical research on these interconnections and practices in the Chinese context is lacking [5, 20, 22]. Therefore, the study will then explore the role of leadership in Chinese HEIs—why it matters, and highlights the use of different leadership styles to establish and sustain effective PLCs in Chinese HEIs.

4 Importance and Possibilities for Leadership

4.1 The Role of Leadership for Effective PLCs in HEIs

There is widespread consensus that senior leadership has a significant impact on school culture, and only strong leadership that fosters a trusting, collaborative, and learning-centred culture can effectively enhance teacher development and student holistic accomplishment [3, 14, 23]. Successful leadership for teacher professional development involves changing teachers' teaching attitudes and intellectual capacities, rather than merely introducing CPD programmes and changing their behaviors [7]. In order to build PLCs and promote CPD, leaders need to embed ongoing professional development into their school culture and reallocate the resources to create critical conditions for effective learning [24]. Furthermore, there is a growing trend among leaders to distribute power and promote a shared leadership. This is because teachers' collaboration and autonomy,

as well as the formation of PLCs, may be hampered by a formal-focused school leadership [25]. Strong leadership, however, does not imply that teachers should be granted complete freedom. Evidence reveals that if teachers are entirely free and leaders have no command over them, school reforms and improvements are impossible to achieve [26]. It is even more difficult for university leaders due to the more complex organizational structure of the university, that is, the existence of departmental leadership and the clear distinction between academic and non-academic staff [27]. Therefore, university leaders play a crucial role in appropriately deciding leadership strategies for building PLCs and connecting the academic and executive branches of HEIs governance.

4.2   Leadership Styles

4.2.1   Instructional Leadership

In China, instructional leadership is a key aspect of school leadership [5]. This type of leadership is focused on objectives, curriculum, and evaluation and its impact on student learning outcome are shown to be much larger than other leadership styles like transformational leadership [25]. Additionally, instructional leadership practices such as feedback are proved by Western scholars to have strong direct effects on teacher development and self-efficacy [28]. When school leaders display an instructional leadership style which keeps teaching a priority, teachers can be motivated to continuously evaluate their teaching methods and enhance teaching quality in collaboration with peers. Following continuous conceptual refinement, the ideal instructional leadership is described as a collaborative effort in a supportive workplace that results in a school-wide programme of action [28]. As supported by Chinese scholars, instructional leadership is an advantageous technique for Chinese principals to impose their implications on teacher collaboration and has positive effects on developing PLCs [22].

4.2.2   Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership (including teacher leadership, co-leadership, collaborative leadership, etc.), as compared with instructional leadership, is also believed to have a greater influence on the development of learning communities [24]. In numerous Western PLCs, principals collaborate with teachers to conduct joint investigations and create chances for teachers to undertake leadership roles in implementing improvements in teaching and learning [14]. A distributed leadership perspective acknowledges that multiple leaders should exist and that leadership activities are transmitted both inside and across organizations [5]. In China, the distributed leadership approach—teacher leadership, has been shown to be favourable in promoting teacher collaboration, with emotional links and shared responsibilities among teachers reinforcing their professional developments [5]. However, teacher leadership still has limitations such as contrived collegiality [25]. To ensure a positive contribution to PLCs and support teacher CPD, school principals must be capable to adapt and combine the leadership styles according to the school's structural and cultural characteristics.

5 Challenges for Chinese Leaders

5.1 Teacher Workload and Motivation Under Covid-19

As reported in Singapore, teachers are already overworked with teaching and non-teaching duties, thus the introduction and implementation of PLCs may be seen as an additional workload [4]. The same issue emerges in China, where teachers must not only complete their teaching activities in order to increase student performance but also assist with school assessment and evaluation issues. The problem was made worse by the outbreak of the Covid-19, which forced teachers to deal with totally online instructional technology, unforeseen policies, and teaching pupils about epidemic prevention. The overwhelmed workload might impair teacher wellbeing and motivation to participate in PLCs and professional development programmes. Furthermore, evidence proved that motivation is the determining factor in whether a teacher can advance while participating in CPD programs [3]. In universities, more complex structures, larger classroom sizes, and the pandemic impact continue to raise the strain on teachers. It again highlights the leader's role to foster a caring and trusting culture and a change in the professional development programme to improve teachers' competence and preparation for new types of teaching [29].

5.2 Understanding and Measuring Effective PLCs

According to the research findings in China, 'PLCs' is a relatively new concept that not all school leaders could understand. Some of them state that they are familiar with the definitions and practices are given in Western countries, others present that they do not know what 'PLCs' is but they think they are doing it as teaching-research groups (TRGs) [5]. As previously stated, there is a paucity of empirical proof and clear guidelines for leaders on how to create effective PLCs in China. In the Asian context, the ambiguity of the PLC procedure and effectiveness may deter teachers from participating in PLC programs, as well as school leaders from prioritizing PLCs in their school reform agenda [4]. Moreover, it is indicated that the measurements of PLCs' effectiveness at different schools levels may alter, which is a challenge for leaders at different stages in distinct contexts [22]. In Western countries, Professional Community Index is normally utilized to measure PLCs' effectiveness. But if PLCs are similar to TRGs in Chinese schools, to what extent can TRGs be seen as PLCs and whether it is effective? Though a majority of studies have employed Likert scales in Western countries to examine PLCs' effectiveness [20], further research is needed to establish a consistent and authoritative standard of measurement at the national level in China.

5.3 The High Power-Distance in China

Section 3.2 has clarified the problem of Chinese high-power distance culture and accountability for teacher collaboration and engagement in PLCs. Despite the fact that the highly hierarchical system remains a complex task, it has been demonstrated that collectivism exists in Chinese society and that it gives opportunities for leaders to enhance teacher collaboration and balance the obstacles posed by the high power-distance culture [21].

6 Conclusions

For leaders to build effective PLCs and overcome the challenges above, some recommendations are given below. Firstly, improving their instructional leadership by learning from outstanding headteachers, making efforts to fully comprehend what PLC is and supporting a shared goal of focusing on student learning [5]. Secondly, promoting distributed leadership such as decentralizing power to the staff at all levels, including both academic and non-academic staff, and involving them in decision-making. Instead of issuing commands from the top-down, this strategy can develop a culture of trust and collaboration, resulting in excellent outcomes. Thirdly, regularly listening to teachers' perspectives on PLC activities and workload, and then developing supporting strategies such as scheduled conferences and mentoring, a stronger teacher performance evaluation system, external pay, and peer research [4]. Though the process may be more difficult during the pandemic, it has been discovered that establishing effective PLCs can provide leaders with an opportunity to comprehend teachers' and students' anxieties and concerns during teaching and learning under Covid-19, as well as a great opportunity to develop a supportive digital atmosphere akin to on-campus interactions [30].

In a word, this study has discussed how PLCs contribute to CPD and the role of leadership in it, as well as some of the challenges that Chinese university leaders confront. Despite this, there is a paucity of macro evidence in the Chinese university settings, so the future studies should concentrate on how leaders can popularize PLCs and investigate detailed guidelines for their implementation in Chinese universities.

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