

# Scrutinizing Professional Learning Community: Its Pros and Cons to Basic Education Teachers

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## Abstract

This article introduces professional learning community (PLC) comprising the definition, components, benefits and drawbacks of PLC, challenges, the implementation of PLC, conclusion and recommendations. It is necessary for teachers to have the willingness to implement PLC and feel the ownership of their PLC practice as teachers are the key agents to bring change into the classrooms. Also, they should understand what PLC means as well as the benefits of PLC to develop their teaching practice and improve student learning. To build up a school learning community, the collaboration of school staff is crucial. Only teachers could not carry on PLC successfully without the support from other stakeholders both inside and outside school. It is also challenging to integrate PLC to teachers' routine work so that teachers have enough time to collaboratively work with other staff to form an effective school learning community for their professional development and student learning outcomes.

Keywords: Basic education teachers, professional development, professional learning community

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## Introduction

This academic article is divided into seven major sections including what is professional learning community?, the components of PLC, benefits and drawbacks of PLC, challenges in implementing PLC, how to implement professional learning community?, conclusion and recommendations.

The current Thai education encounters the low quality of Thai student learning achievements both in the national and international levels. Regarding ALTV4, Thai PBS (2021), the O-NET score results in an academic year 2020 indicated that the lowest of the average score of mathematics, science and English courses was less than 30%. Furthermore, the results of the international 2018 PISA examinations revealed Thai students underperformed the international average in core subjects and ranked 66th for reading, 56th for mathematics, and 52nd for sciences (Bangkok Post, 2019). It is likely that students tend not to be able to apply their knowledge to improve their potential, solve problems and contribute to the society. Not only teachers who directly involve with students in the classroom but also other stakeholders like the directors, school committee and students' parents need to join hands in order to improve the quality of the student learning and their attributes. Thus, it is crucial to equip the students with knowledge, essential skills and desired

characteristics to increase individual students' potential to be successful in their future careers (Office of the Educational Council, Ministry of Education, 2009). The professional learning community (PLC) is one of the methods to help strengthen the collaboration of educational stakeholders to improve teacher's pedagogies and student learning. Wongyai and Patphol (2019) mention that PLC helps teachers to develop their pedagogies and leads to the quality improvement of the students in the aspects of knowledge, thinking, behaviours and other skills, and competencies. The implementation of PLC ; however, takes time as it is the change process of stakeholders and organisations to understand what PLC means and how to implement it effectively (Hall & Hord, 2015).

## What is Professional Learning Community?

Educators have a broad consensus about PLC by defining PLC as a group of stakeholders and teachers both inside and outside schools interact, question, collaborate, learn together and reflect teaching practices to apply knowledge obtained for change regarding students' needs to improve student learning (e.g., Bolam *et al.*, 2005 ; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006 ; Philpott & Oates, 2017 ; Toole & Louis, 2002). Dufour (2004) also proposes three main ideas to define PLC: a focus on student learning, teachers' culture of



collaboration for classroom practice improvement, and an emphasis on results of student performance. Besides, the Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020) state that PLC refers to the three main principles including profession, learning and community which are the basis of joining together, working together, collaboration, and learning for a successful development. Likewise, Wongyai and Patphol (2019) state that PLC is an assemble point of educators to support professional competence and improve the quality of the students through collaborative learning, lesson learned and sharing learning for continuous development.

As mentioned above, it could be concluded that PLC involves with the

collaboration and interaction among those educational stakeholders to provide the reflection of teachers' teaching practice in the classroom in order to improve teaching and learning activities aiming at enhancing student learning.

### The Components of PLC

The crucial components of PLC are noted by several studies (e.g., Bolam *et al.*, 2005 ; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006 ; Hord & Sommers, 2008 ; Slegers, den Brok, Verbiest, Moolenaar & Daly, 2013 ; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006 ; Suwanwong, 2016 ; Tam, 2015 ; Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2020) as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Components of PLC

The Components of PLC	Studies
<i>Shared beliefs, norms, values and vision:</i> The staff share missions and goals aiming to improve student learning.	Bolam <i>et al.</i> (2005), Dufour <i>et al.</i> (2006), Hord and Sommers (2008), Slegers <i>et al.</i> (2013), Stoll <i>et al.</i> (2006) ; Suwanwong (2016), Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020)
<i>Shared and supportive leadership:</i> The directors share their authority and decision making with staff for problem solving.	Hord and Sommers (2008), Slegers <i>et al.</i> (2013), Suwanwong (2016), Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020)



The Components of PLC	Studies
<i>Collective learning Application:</i> The directors and staff determine what to learn and how to apply new methods into classroom practices.	Bolam <i>et al.</i> (2005), Hord and Sommers (2008), Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020)
<i>Supportive conditions:</i> Physical and structural factors (Time, schedule, resources, and supportive policies for communication and collaboration), and relational factors and human capacities (Trust building, fostering attitudes and interpersonal relationships) are taken into account.	Dufour <i>et al.</i> (2006), Hord and Sommers (2008), Slegers <i>et al.</i> (2013), Stoll <i>et al.</i> (2006), Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020)
<i>Shared practice:</i> Observation, peer coaching and giving feedback are utilized for the improvement of individual teachers and community.	Dufour <i>et al.</i> (2006), Bolam <i>et al.</i> (2005), Hord and Sommers (2008), Suwanwong (2016), Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020)
<i>Collaborative cultures:</i> Staff members learn and work collaboratively.	Dufour <i>et al.</i> (2006), Stoll <i>et al.</i> (2006), Suwanwong (2016), Tam (2015), Teachers and Basic Education Personnel Development Bureau, Office of the Basic Education Commission (2020)

According to Table 1, it could be seen that to implement PLC effectively, the stakeholders must trust and work with each team member to share a common goal, collaborate with one another for better methods to bring changes into practices, give the feedback and put the emphasis on improving students' learning potential and learning outcomes as well as have support from school.

## Benefits and Drawbacks of PLC

PLC includes stakeholders, such as the directors, teachers and students who take part in teaching and learning at school to learn together and support one another to develop school curriculum and improve student learning (Hord, 1997). Thus, stakeholders' understanding of PLC is crucial to build up school learning community. When they have a clear understanding about PLC,



they are able to collaboratively work with others in a school learning community to develop teaching practices and enhance student learning competence and performance.

Regarding Hord (1997), PLC benefits both students and teachers. Students pay attention and increase their learning achievements. Teachers engage to school missions and goals, feel of powerful learning, take responsibility to student learning progress, better understand the content, know their roles in teaching, discover new body of knowledge and beliefs in teaching, increase their satisfaction, adjust their teaching to align with student learning, and create new things systematically. Similarly, Hord and Sommers (2008) highlight that teachers obtain more knowledge, skills, and understanding in what they teach from learning together with other staff members. Students' needs are also taken into account aiming at improving student learning. In order to do this, teachers work together and adapt their teaching to suit students' needs for enhancing students' achievements. Tam (2015) also examined the role of PLC in changing teachers' beliefs and practices of a Chinese department in a Hong Kong secondary school by using interview and observation. The results indicated that the development of a coherent structure, a collaborative culture, and effective learning activities helped teachers to cope with difficulties as well as

persuade their motivation for transformation. Teachers can form a strong learning community to lead change through their collaboration such as observation, dialogue and reflection. It was also found that teacher change in five aspects: curriculum, teaching, learning, roles of teachers, and learning to teach. The continual professional collaboration with other school staff fosters teachers' learning and their teaching practice as well as the improvement of student learning results (Tam, 2015 ; Tangkitvanit *et al.*, 2013).

Serviss (2020) also proposes the benefits of PLC to help improve teaching and learning. Firstly, PLC provides the educator team the direct opportunity to enhance teachers' reflection and instructional practices and student's learning outcomes. Secondly, PLC builds trust and the strong relationships among team members as it assists each team member to understand other team members' strengths. Thirdly, team members have the collaboration to one another. Thus, sharing ideas and best practices can trigger teachers' thoughts to come up with new research and updated technology tools for the classroom. Lastly, teachers could reflect on their ideas through the process of PLC. Sharing and learning from other team members allow teachers to think back to their lessons and adjust their teaching practices. Additionally, Rulan (2015) stated that teachers collaboratively work through PLC to discuss about students'



social and emotional needs, learning goals, teaching strategies, classroom management as well as students' emotion.

As a university lecturer, the author has been working with a number of basic educational teachers and other educational stakeholders, such as directors, heads of foreign language departments and educational supervisors. Talking about the implementation of PLC at schools, secondary school teachers as practitioners shared their voices that both students and teachers gain the benefits from PLC. It provides the teachers the opportunity to share and exchange their opinions. Both senior teachers and novice ones accept other's perspectives and view organizing learning and teaching activities in various facets. The head of a foreign language department at a secondary school mentioned that the members of PLC at school learn how to improve teaching techniques together as shown as follows.

*"...We got ideas from many people and learnt from one another to plan lessons, learning activities, games and pedagogies." (Head of a foreign language department A, Conversation, 13/01/2021)*

In the students' part, the students learn more collaboratively and have more opportunity to communicate with one another through small group works provided by teachers. One of secondary school teachers expressed the view of student

learning that the students learn more actively and exchange their ideas to complete learning tasks as the following example.

*"...The students worked and learnt together. They interacted and shared ideas with their classmates in doing activities." (Teacher A, Conversation, 13/01/2021)*

As mentioned above, it could be seen that PLC helps improve students' learning achievements and teacher's ways of teaching in the classroom to equip students with 21st century skills including reading and writing, arithmetics, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, cross-cultural understanding, collaboration, teamwork and leadership, communications, information and media literacy, computing and ICT literacy, career and learning skills, and compassion (Office of the Education Council, 2009). Pubootcha, Chalakbang, Phengsawat, and Steannoppakao (2018) also pointed out that the quality of teachers affects the quality of learners.

In relation to Hairon and Tan (2016), teachers encounter a basic teaching workload on a regular basis. Hence, they need time to implement PLC on the following aspects: peer classroom observations, reading and consolidating appropriate literature, research instrument construction, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings within and outside of schools together with the administration to support such activities.



Adequate time is crucial in implementing PLC in the classroom instruction. According to Dulin (2018), teachers need sufficient time to meet in a PLC process because they have to meet other team members many times per week. It is challenging for teachers to prepare their lessons for the students because teachers have the number of teaching loads. Teachers also need more time to prepare their lessons. Accordingly, teachers and other stakeholders find it difficult to gather and observe the classroom practice due to the limitation of time. One secondary school English teacher at a municipal school stated that school responsibilities and teaching loads are barriers for teachers to implement PLC in the classroom as illustrated below.

*“...Teachers had lot of teaching loads per day. Apart from teaching, teachers had other school responsibilities. We involved in academic affairs, student development affairs and teaching and learning quality assurance. Thus, it was difficult to arrange time for classroom observation and gave the feedback for each teacher’s teaching practice.” (Teacher B, Conversation, 15/01/2021)*

As mentioned above, teachers and other supportive staff are busy with school routines. Accordingly, they cannot arrange time to observe the classroom nor reflect instructional activities in class. To solve this

barrier, they ask a teacher who teaches in the classroom to record his or her teaching and then share a teaching record to each PLC member to watch a teaching video separately and give the feedback later. For a classroom reflection, they spend time during lunchtime and after school. Although PLC members give the feedback after watching a teaching video, they might miss discussing some important issues in the classroom setting because it is not the real time observation. Furthermore, individual PLC member watches a video of teaching in a different time before proposing the suggestions to improve learning and teaching activities.

In addition, this limitation of time for team members to undertake PLC tends to prevent them from doing a process of after action review (AAR) which is similar to plan, do, check and act (PDCA) to reflect lessons in order to improve classroom teaching practices. Regarding the National Science and Technology Development Agency, Thailand (2016), AAR is the important tool utilised for a reflective practice in order to improve the effectiveness of the future practice. The facilitator as a team leader and the team members should carry out AAR immediately or as soon as possible as the team members still have fresh memories to reflect the practice as well as the application for the more effective performance.



## Challenges in implementing PLC

Similar to the earlier mentioned, Senge (1990) states that most teachers do not have an opportunity to work together. Furthermore, one of the difficulties for teachers to exchange ideas of classroom problems is over teaching loads. This aligns with the study of Hairon and Tan (2016) who studied the implementation of PLC between Singapore and Shanghai and found that teachers' heavy workload was the main limitation in implementing PLC. Teachers have already had a burden of teaching loads and other school responsibilities. Therefore, teachers may feel that PLC is another burden apart from their routine work. In the Thai context, several previous studies mentioned that teachers had heavy loads of teaching (e.g., Hongboontri & Keawkhong, 2014 ; Namwong, 2020 ; Noom-ura, 2013). For example, Namwong (2020) found in his study that teaching loads is one of the important factors in teaching and implementing learner-centred pedagogies at school. Teachers spend their time for their routine teaching as well as other school responsibilities. Accordingly, they do not have much time to collaboratively work to observe other teachers' classroom teaching to give the feedback in order to improve teaching and learning activities in classroom setting. In relation to the above studies, to implement PLC in Thai classrooms more effectively, Ministry officials, policy makers, educators

and directors need to reconsider about teachers' teaching loads so that teachers have much more time to work collaboratively with other teachers to build up PLC at school to benefit student learning.

Thai stakeholders still feel that the hierarchical structure of educational organization influences teachers to implement PLC in a school level. It is potential that the hierarchical structure is the constraint for teacher collaboration in implementing PLC. Prabjandee (2019) studied PLC with 217 secondary school teachers in an educational service area in an eastern province of Thailand and found that teachers felt the tension to implement PLC ; however, they followed the policy as it would benefit the student learning. As Hofstede (2001) states, the high power distance, a structure of commanding top-down, seems dominant in Asian countries, such as, Singapore, China as well as Thailand.

Besides, it is likely that PLC is expected to proceed at school ; however, there is not a clear direction how to build up a school learning community. Directors and teachers are informed to carry out PLC in school without any clear guideline and constant support. This lack of support leaves teachers with ambiguity and frustration to achieve it. Regarding Harris and Jone (2010), PLC needs support from the top to keep the momentum of building PLC in schools. However, it is potential for directors to take lead the success of PLC





in schools. Dulin (2018) also added that 'consistent and steady support' from the director and school staff helps teachers to develop effective PLC to improve student learning.

## **How to implement professional learning community?**

According to Schaap and Bruijn (2018), the ownership is the crucial factor to reinforce team members to drive PLC in schools. Philpott and Oates (2017) also state that when teachers are empowered to scrutinize and modify their practices, they will feel that they are a part of the PLC process and value it to transform change for teaching and learning. The directors could also create understanding and collaboration among PLC staff members and stakeholders as well as support a PLC group learning in school (Sutarsih & Saud, 2019). Apart from this, PLC team members need more training and coaching (Bess, 2020).

Collaborative culture together with a learning emphasis is also one of the important characteristics of PLC (DuFour, DuFour & Robert, 2008). According to Risko and Vogt (2016), PLC aims at sharing the understandings on a particular issue and then finding its solution. Thus, the interaction and collaboration are required for PLC members for problem solving. Hord and Sommers (2008) also state that PLC is staff's learning together to solve the significant topic. The directors have a key

role to lead change in school like PLC. Staff have to clearly understand PLC goals before implementing them. Trilaksono, Purusottama, Misbach and Prasetya (2019) also state that the directors and teachers' collaboration in PLC could change school culture. This kind of collaboration could be done through the participation in planning and implementing the change between directors and teachers. With working collaboratively with the directors, teachers gain the confidence in their PLC implementation.

Regarding Senge (1990) and Sergiovanni (1994), to develop PLC at schools, it is necessary to adjust school context to be learner-centred as well as activate and accept diversity to manage curriculum, teaching and learning activities based on multiple intelligences. Students are developed to be active learners to build up knowledge and solve problems. School staff have to accept changes and learn together to seek knowledge and methods to apply them to use among school staff. To do this, reflection, dialogue and feedback are required. Besides, it is necessary to integrate school education management with the nested communities, such as families, community members, educational institutions and other organisations to exchange knowledge and experience to support an effective learning community as well as learning sources for students.

Hall and Hord (2015) identify six strategies to implement change of PLC.



These strategies include 1) Articulating a shared vision: The staff are engaged to discuss about the problematic issues ; 2) Developing a plan: The staff are involved to the vision of change and the use of resources ; 3) Checking progress: The staff understand and know how to implement PLC ; 4) Assessing an individual learning progress in employing PLC ; 5) Providing assistance relating to individual learning assessment to implement PLC more effectively ; and 6) The context for change: Support staff's learning together to enhance students' achievements.

Harris and Jone (2010) also propose other challenges forming PLC within, between and across schools. Firstly, PLC groups need constant support for collaborative activities for whole school change. Secondly, some teachers' who are not familiar with PLC may resist PLC groups. Thirdly, PLC needs to be integrated to school routines as a development planning.

Chaichaowarat (2015) proposes that the implementation of PLC comprise 1) Sharing a common goal in learning management to develop the learner potential ; 2) Sharing classroom observation 3) Collaborating and learning for target change ; 4) Reflecting the results to develop learners ; and 5) Creating HOPE for team members. HOPE consists of honesty and humanity (using facts and paying respect to others), option and openness (a selection of the best thing for students and being

open-minded), patience and persistence (being patient and putting effort to achieve the goal), and efficacy and enthusiasm (building confidence on the results of teaching methods to enhance learners' learning).

Apart from the aforementioned, the study of Hairon and Tan (2016) points out the important points to implement PLC at schools. These include 1) Sufficient time for teachers to engage in collaborative learning ; 2) The alignment of teachers' involvement in PLC with staff appraisal ; 3) A continuation of a learning culture through collaboration ; 4) The discussions and participation in PLC focus on teachers' tacit knowledge development ; and 5) Convincing teachers that PLC is positive for classroom teaching and student learning outcomes.

In addition, Hudson, Hudson, Gray and Bloxham (2013) found that experienced mentors who are positive and willing to share and facilitate mentoring practices with their knowledge and resources can support effective teaching. One secondary school teacher exemplified this point from taking part in the implementation of PLC at school that coaching is needed by stating:

*"...Only teachers and the head of a foreign language department were involved in the teaching reflection. To make it more effective, other stakeholders like PLC mentors, parents and directors should take part in the process of PLC" (Teacher A, Conversation, 13/01/2021)*



One of the secondary school teachers also expressed her view that it is necessary for teachers and other stakeholders to be trained to understand the principles of PLC and how to implement it in their schools, e.g.:

*“...Teachers and other school staff should be trained what PLC means and how to implement it in the school context in order that they have the consensus how to proceed it in their school.” (Teacher B, Conversation, 15/01/2021)*

In summary, it has been shown that the stakeholders need to understand the aims of PLC and the goals of implementing PLC. Not only stakeholders' PLC ownership but also the interaction, collaboration and support are required to drive PLC in schools. Adequate time and positive mentors as well as constant support from school are essential factors to implement PLC more effectively.

## Conclusion

PLC is a group of educational stakeholders who have the same common goals to improve the quality of teaching practices and student learning. To create PLC, shared visions, collective learning, supportive leadership and conditions, shared practices, and collaborative cultures are necessary. Stakeholders' willingness and

understanding to implement are also main factors to bring about change in pedagogical methods for students' learning improvement. Nevertheless, a lack of PLC training, heavy teaching loads and other school responsibilities could be barriers to implement PLC as PLC members need enough time to meet, observe, coach and give feedback.

## Recommendations

To effectively implement PLC, a clear guideline and training of PLC are needed for all school staff members to understand the purposes and advantages of PLC, particularly, teachers are the key agents to bring change must be willing to learn from one another and build up a school as the learning community. The training and coaching related to classroom observation help support PLC team members to give the constructive feedback for teachers to adapt their teaching practices to suit student's needs, and to improve student learning for the quality of education. Additionally, the director who has the authority to lead change of pedagogical practices to the classroom is a key person to constantly drive PLC in school by setting a PLC schedule as a routine work for PLC team members to have sufficient time to meet and reflect teachers' teaching practices.



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