



# Teachers' experiences in a professional learning community: Insights on policy delivery and characteristics of the PLC in schools

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## Abstract

The professional learning community (PLC) is a crucial concept in professional development that is recognized worldwide. In terms of education, Thailand has set policies for teachers to manage the PLC. The driving policy at each level for the teacher still has many weaknesses, which may lead to unexpected results. The objective of this research was to analyze: (1) the nature of driving the PLC policy in schools to the teacher; and (2) the teachers' experience in the PLC in schools, where teachers are involved and operate in the PLC. The method used quantitative and qualitative questionnaires, fieldwork for observation, and interviews with teachers involved in a PLC and implementation policy. The results showed that each school has different driving characteristics from school administrators. Due to the other exposures of the policy and regulatory agencies, teachers' practice is different in each school, which is contrary to the PLC principles. Support from the school and administrators is still low. There is not much teacher participation in the PLC. This research will lead to a change in policy driving methods for teachers that must be clearer in their practices. According to the PLC policy, the work promotion design must be consistent with the teacher's school context and characteristics rather than the entire country's holistic advertising.

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## Introduction

The professional learning community (PLC) is a core concept recognized throughout the world for professional development. For example, pre-kindergarten to 12th-grade schools in the US have implemented PLC to support and share collaborative working (Gray &

Summers, 2015). Those involved in education at the policy level in Thailand, a developing country in education, will set a policy for teachers to organize a PLC in schools. This concept's primary process is to bring people together to create learning, share knowledge and reflect ideas in various areas for teacher development and the teacher's learning management. In this regard, the teachers in Thailand will be part of the academic promotion as well.

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Feldman (2020), Hord (2009), Olsson (2019), and Toole and Louis (2002) stated that teachers who join the PLC would connect, understand, know students and classrooms and have various ideas. Meetings between the teachers and those involved will allow teachers to exchange knowledge. Participating in a PLC of teachers will enable teachers to develop and improve classroom control, reflect ideas, and not feel alone but feel encouraged to solve the problem from various perspectives (DuFour, 2004). When teachers with different expertise share their knowledge, it will benefit learning management and student achievement.

Preliminary data from informal interviews with teachers about the PLC process currently organized by teachers showed that teacher practices vary between different schools and groups that the PLC participates in. One of the reasons teachers' practices are ambiguous, as obtained from informal interviews, may be because the top-down policy-driven process from the policy level that comes down to the teacher goes through multiple departments. When analyzing the policy, it was found that it still does not show teachers' guidelines. This driving method makes the policies' substance to the departments and teachers incomplete (Wongwanich, Piromsombat, Klaikleng, & Sriklaub, 2013).

The above hypothesis is consistent with the results of the Educational Supervision Authority of Thailand's study documents. When the supervisory processes that go into the school have many characteristics, the school administrators' perceptions and interpretations to guide teachers to practice will also be different. Thus, it is essential to analyze the school's perception after the policy has been received, which can be reflected in the school's driving methods to the teachers.

From all the issues mentioned above, this research is necessary to analyze teachers' experience in the PLC from the perspective of driving school policies, teacher practice issues in PLC, supporting factors and the teachers' impact from the PLC. The research objectives were as follows:

1. To analyze the driving characteristics of the PLC policy in the school to teachers.
2. To analyze the school PLC's characteristics that the teachers are involved in and the actions taken to achieve the government's policy.

## **Literature Review**

### *Policy Advocacy in the PLC in Thailand*

The Ministry of Education's (MOE) policy movement in Thailand is driven from a top-down approach. It starts from the policy-level department to the educational supervision department in each area, after which it will go into the operating-level department (school) and then the teachers. The community policy of professional learning will operate in the same manner.

According to the study of various documents, The Secretariat Office of the Teachers Council of Thailand (SOTCT, 2018) responsible for supporting teachers, established guidelines to promote and support teachers' professional development network. Funds are allocated to subsidize professional development activities for teachers and educational personnel in the academic learning community. This support has its characteristics, as specified by the SOTCT.

Also, once the regulatory authorities have received the policy and the policy has been passed on to the teacher, they will support the teacher's work according to that policy. Regulatory authorities in some areas will create a manual for driving the PLC process to the educational institution, which will show various operations as specified by that department. Some agencies have also published guidelines for driving PLCs to develop the learners' quality so that educational personnel can be used as guidelines. From the characteristics mentioned above, it was found that in the policy-driven approach to building a PLC in schools, from the MOE to regulatory and operational agencies, there is no straightforward approach but rather diverse approaches depending on various regulatory agencies. This may lead to misunderstandings and practices in the implementation of the PLC of teachers.

### *Characteristics of the PLC*

The PLC consists of two concepts: the professional and learning community. The PLC is a collaborative academic process with the goals of teachers, administrators, and those involved in learning and teaching. The improvement of the quality of education through the enhancement of the knowledge and ability of teachers together as a group will be reflected in each other's work by continuously improving themselves and the group and so result in a culture of learning sharing in schools that will maximize the effectiveness of learners (Bolam et al.,

2005; DeLuca, Bolden, & Chan, 2017; DuFour, 2004, 2007; Hargreaves, 2007; Hord, 2009; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Toole & Louis, 2002).

Many scholars in Thailand and elsewhere have studied and consistently demonstrated the importance of a PLC over the past decade. The PLC is a study of collaborative learning concepts, inquiry, reflection, self-evaluation, and school-based curriculum development. Research has shown that if a school can create a PLC, it will be most effective for educational personnel in teaching and student development. It will also help improve the techniques and methods of teaching and school reform, foster a sense of belonging to a group or a community, share feelings, and increase work motivation and satisfaction from student learning responsibility (Bolam et al., 2005; Schaap & De Bruijn, 2017).

Also, the critical characteristics of the PLC have been described. DuFour (2004), Feldman (2020), Hord (2009) and Toole and Louis (2002) explained that student learning comes from continuous teaching quality improvement. Teachers involved in the PLC will have the ability to connect and understand students and the classroom and learn with colleagues. Teachers will have a variety of ideas from information from their students. Therefore, the meeting between teachers is essential. It provides space for teachers to prioritize individual student learning, assign needs, subject areas, new strategies and ways to increase the teaching effectiveness in the teacher learning community. When a teacher finds problems in students' inappropriate behavior, other teachers will have the opportunity to determine what should be done to solve the issues in a friendly way.

## Methodology

This teachers' experiences research collected qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources, including interviews with key informants and teachers' questionnaires. Details of the procedures are as follows:

### Participants

The quantitative data collection was obtained from secondary school teachers in Bangkok and the surrounding area. Sample size was determined using the G\* Power program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) and found to be 250 teachers. However, the sample size was set at

320 people to compensate for the response rate. The sampling method for the quantitative data collection used multi-stage random sampling.

Step 1: The randomization unit was at the provincial level and simple random sampling was used to select provinces in Bangkok and its surrounding areas, consisting of two of the six provinces.

Step 2: The randomization unit was the school, using stratified random sampling, which divided the school by size as: (1) small and medium; (2) large; and (3) extra-large schools. After that, schools were randomly selected in Step 1, covering three sizes, with four schools in each size and 24 schools.

Step 3: The randomization unit was randomly selected from the teachers in schools from Step 2, taking ten teachers per small and medium-sized school and 15 from large and extra-large schools, making 320 teachers.

The qualitative data were collected with 18 teachers involved in implementing a PLC in schools and used purposive sampling, conducted in the six schools where quantitative data were collected. These were divided into three schools that had organized PLC continuously and three schools that had not organized PLC continuously. The criteria for dividing the two types of schools were based on the review of published PLC evidence on schools' websites and cross-checked by the initial interview with teachers in those schools. This section used interviews with teachers in the school and combined such with the returned quantitative data.

### Research Instruments

There were three categories of research instruments:

Category 1: A questionnaire about organizing a PLC in schools and the results were used to collect information about implementing a PLC in the school. This tool was 58-items and 5-level Likert scale, development from concepts, theories, relevant research and quality validation—the content validity between 0.80 and 1.00 and reliability between 0.94 and 0.98.

Category 2: Observation tool by the researcher to observe the organization of the PLC in the school by collecting data on many issues (e.g., methods, processes, and teacher engagement characteristics).

Category 3: Semi-structured interview tool with teachers who are involved in organizing the PLC on many issues. Examples include the methods, processes, teacher engagement characteristics, essential needs, success factors and teachers' outcomes.

### Right Protection of the Samples

The rights of the participants in this study were protected. Before the quantitative and qualitative data collection was conducted, the researcher presented this research project to the Research Ethics Committee, Group 2, Chulalongkorn University and was certified to conduct the research.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, average, and standard deviation (SD). For qualitative data, the content analysis was analyzed. Before analyzing the qualitative data, the data validation was first performed using triangulation by verifying the consistency of data from multiple sources.

## Results

### Characteristics of driving a PLC Policy in Schools

The survey data indicate that most schools have a clearly defined PLC operation policy (55.80%). The PLC process is driven by committee appointment (37.70%) and a clear PLC target for each semester/academic year (38.50%) as well as formulating plans and methods to make the PLC formal in each semester (38.80%), setting a particular period for reporting PLC results (41.20%) and creating manuals and records for PLC grouping in schools (25.00%). The results are summarized in **Table 1**.

From the field visit to the school, further information was obtained that revealed the drive of the school's policies; after receiving the supervisor's policy, the

school had organized a PLC with different driving characteristics. Some schools will appoint a policy-driven committee from one of the academic resources, human resources or teacher departments responsible for the policy. The working group will design the methods to encourage teachers to understand the policy, such as inviting external speakers to train them, which may be civil servants with experience in PLC or professors from universities and will allow teachers to experiment with this before the actual operation. However, in some schools, teachers must interpret and perform their work according to their understanding. The results are summarized in **Table 2**.

### Teachers' Experience on Characteristics of the PLC in Schools

#### Characteristics of the PLCs in schools that teachers participated in

The survey results showed that the characteristics of the teachers in each PLC were diverse in the subjects taught (58.10%), age range (53.10%) and academics (46.90%). Most of the time, it took about one hour to do a PLC (54.60%). The group consisted of around 3–5 people, and they performed a PLC 2–3 times per week. From the field visit to the school, it was found that the teacher's timetable set the PLC lesson period at two days/week. Regarding teachers' role in making a PLC, these changed according to the group that the teacher joined. Sometimes, the PLC did not have a clear role assignment (16.20%). Most teachers in the PLC set goals for problem-solving and encouraged students to have various improvements (86.00%). Next, they set goals at a similar level — namely, self-development, academic development, school problem solving and other areas. Teachers grouped in many forms.

**Table 1** Policy delivery methods in schools

Policy delivery methods in schools	Percent
Principal determined clear PLC operating policy.	55.80
Principal clearly set PLC goals for each semester/academic year.	38.50
A PLC committee has been appointed to drive the PLC process.	37.70
A PLC committee creates manuals and records for PLC grouping in schools.	25.00
There is supervision from the executives or related persons, such as the educational supervisor.	23.50
Principal has supported and joined the PLC group.	31.20
Principal sets a forum to exchange knowledge between schools.	24.20
A PLC committee sets the period for reporting PLC results.	41.20
School invites outsiders to help with education and plan implementation.	21.50
A PLC committee formulate a plan and procedure to make an official PLC in each semester.	38.80

**Table 2** Differences in policy driving PLC in schools that have different operations

Characteristics of driving a PLC policy	Schools perform continuously	Schools perform discontinuously
Working group	✓	✓
Training from experts	✓	
Provides learning from masters outside the school	✓	
Manual preparation and operation record	✓	✓
Formulation of the official PLC plan	✓	
Determining issues for making the PLC from school		✓
Opportunity for teachers to set up PLC issues	✓	✓
Determining the duration of the PLC	✓	✓
Monitoring the work of executives	✓	
Forum to exchange knowledge among teachers	✓	

### *Teachers' performance in the PLC in schools*

From driving the PLC policies in schools for teachers to practice, it was found that there were no definite principles from top-level departments, namely the MOE and district offices. Schools with different driving methods will result in various performances of the teachers in the PLC. This survey found that the school's size differently contributed to the driving method and the teachers' practice. The school size reflects the management of various resources that support the school operations. These issues will make the driving of PLC policies and the behavior of teachers different.

In the planning of a PLC, teachers and PLC groups will share their teaching experience, work and student information with PLC group members to reflect problems ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). In this regard, methods or procedures will be designed for joint operations ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) using multiple student data as evidence to identify the issues and objectives of making PLCs in groups ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ). Collecting various information related to teaching and learning is the plan for working with PLC group members ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ).

The field data analysis provided further information that teachers will pass on the knowledge and understanding to the group members. When members have completed their knowledge and understanding of a PLC concept, they will discuss and share their experiences and propose problems. Most members will present issues related to learning management. Some schools will define problems and development needs from the beginning of the management, such as correcting low school national test scores. It was also found that some schools prioritized the issues to determine those problems that should be solved immediately. Teachers believe that if the priority problems are already solved, the following topics will be resolved simultaneously.

*"When we have problems, we analyze them, and then we prioritize the problems by selecting the three priorities that are of similar importance. When we solve the first problem, the next problem will be resolved because some problems are related. The most important thing is that we have to prioritize well."* (Interviews with teachers in schools which performed continuously, February 2020.)

*"The problems discussed in that group are problems with teaching and submission. If the teacher wants to do the accreditation, we will focus on the teacher improving the school O-Net."* (Interviews with teachers in schools which performed discontinuously, February 2020.)

Teachers will share problem-solving planning and propose methods and guidelines for problem-solving and student development. Some schools that have continuously implemented PLC schemes improve the processes and solutions quickly, constantly experimenting with new techniques. Other schools rely on successful solutions from previous answers, and they will find that improvements in their methods, approaches and further experiments are rarely made.

*"When we have the method of what to do, how to fix the problem when done, we will discuss with colleagues whether the work is good or not. If it's not OK, we will quickly fix it."* (Interviews with teachers in schools which performed continuously, February 2020.)

After planning and designing the student development activities, the teacher will solve the students' learning problems according to the operational plan set and the PLC group members ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). While implementing the problem solving and student development, they will collect information about student learning outcomes, for example, observing classroom instructions, to reflect performance outcomes ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ).

After implementing solutions in the classroom as planned by the PLC group, it was found that teachers will carefully listen to the presentation of information from PLC members and provide opinions to form a student development plan that could be put into practice ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). However, the field survey results in the school differed from the questionnaire survey on some issues, namely, the implementation of PLC in schools often takes place throughout one semester. After solving the problems and sharing the information, in the final step, the teachers record the PLC results to present to the administrators to be used as work results. However, there was not much change in the operation in the next round. Details of driving the community policy of vocational learning in schools to the teachings of teachers can be summarized as follows:

“Most of us will adjust the work from time to time during the process. In the end, we will summarize the various forms to submit to the school, but we will not revise or rework.”

(Interviews with teachers in schools which performed continuously, February 2020.)

“*At the end of the semester, we will record information in the logbook. General information about the PLC. After that, we will propose ideas to the school principal for approval.*” (Interviews with teachers in schools which performed discontinuously, February 2020.)

#### *Supporting factors of the PLC in schools*

The survey data on school support and school administrators in implementing PLCs in schools showed that schools support areas where PLC groups can be integrated to conveniently engage with members ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), and there will be information from a variety of sources. Implementation of the PLC concept in schools ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) will be appreciated, praising PLC members' success. Schools and administrators have supported issues at a lower level than other areas, such as participating in learning activities with teachers in the PLC group of administrators ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ).

The above information explained administrators' involvement in creating a PLC in schools with ongoing operations from the field visit. Executives became a member of the PLC group. The practice of administrators with teachers in the initial stages was to be a facilitator, acting as an example of leadership in conversation. As a result, teachers see the importance of the PLC. The administrators' observation and follow-up are considered from the activity record of teachers in

creating a PLC. Administrators' participation is one factor that drives teachers to practice learning among the PLC members, which is an essential behavior in building a successful PLC. The data collection found that in schools with continuous PLC practices, members will collaborate to research knowledge and share experiences.

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## Discussion and Conclusion

The characteristics of driving the school's PLC policies to teachers revealed that each school is driven by different school administrators, such as providing knowledge about the expert practice and forming an official PLC program. In particular, the issue of PLC implementation from schools will define problems in PLC implementation differently. However, different driving policies are used in schools, which may be because the government and regulatory agencies' guidelines are unclear in the process. They focus on the policy results that need to be achieved such as the number of times teachers must attend each year. The transfer process has top-down characteristics, which may cause discrepancies in the operational level's perceptions (Gray & Summers, 2015; Haiyan, & Allan, 2020; Ho, Ong, & Tan, 2020; Wongwanich et al., 2013). Thailand's education policy drives have tended to look like this for a long time. This delivery process will cause practice problems for teachers and will likely require more suitable delivery methods.

The study results also show that most of the Thai teachers' PLC issues are from the schools and teachers' interests and are not referenced in learning management and learners. Besides, the PLC grouping is focused on the subjects taught rather than according to the common problems in learners' development. The above characteristics reflect that such PLCs' starting point may not be as it should (Hord, 2009; Toole & Louis, 2002), affecting future results.

The findings indicate that for the factors supporting the PLC in schools, the issues supported by schools and administrators at a lower level than in other areas were participation in learning activities with teachers in the PLC group of administrators. This point reflects that administrators continue to separate teachers and themselves from work, resulting in no mutual learning. Especially for schools with many teachers, administrators are responsible only for broadcasting and will deliver the policy. There is not much participation. This is somewhat inconsistent with the principles of PLC that emphasize

exchanging knowledge from people with various experiences or expertise to crystallize ideas and help each other achieve the expected results (DuFour, 2004; Gray & Summers, 2015; Ho et al., 2020; Hord, 2009; Toole & Louis, 2002).

## Recommendations

The results of the study indicate that the driving of PLC policies is different among schools. As a result, the teachers' practices are also different. The causes of this are ambiguity and inaccuracies in the guidelines, which are top-down driven by policy-level agencies and educational regulators in each area. Therefore, the policy department should set the PLC policy for the result they want and specify the various practices and methods of supporting teachers' work with supervising agencies. Currently, there are multiple means of support. Moreover, policy-level agencies should consider the context and work of teachers as a priority in determining the policy-driven plan for teachers to implement.

Some differences are not in the same direction from the teachers' practices, especially in schools that have implemented PLC continuously and in schools with a general PLC operation. This research has provided preliminary information about the support and mobilization of different schools. However, teachers' practice is dependent not only on the approval of other sectors but also on many factors of the teacher. Future research should focus on analyzing these factors at a more personal level to be used as information combined with school support.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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