A Professional Learning Community Strategy Towards Students’ Achievements

Shamsudin Othman\textsuperscript{a*}, Abdul Rasid Jamian\textsuperscript{b}, Azhar Md. Sabil\textsuperscript{c}, Rozita Radhiah Said\textsuperscript{d}, Rosmaria Omar\textsuperscript{e}, \textsuperscript{a,c,d,e} Department of Language and Humanities Education, University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia \textsuperscript{b} Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia, Email: \textsuperscript{a*}s_shamsudin@upm.edu.my

\textbf{Purpose of the study:} This paper focuses on the theory and concept of Professional Learning Community (PLC/KPP) and its strategies on students’ achievement in public university and institutes of teacher education. Professional Learning Community has specific strategies to improve student achievement. PLC refers to the education institution’s culture that encourages continuous learning among educators in their institutions. The teaching culture is not considered as an individual’s job but it is more about obtaining criticism and performing improvements. Lecturers play an important role in ensuring that their students’ future is brighter and more outstanding. Thus, the effective strategies are: to emphasise a lecturer’s skills and knowledge, build quality relationships, arrange a very focused program, mobilise existing resources, and develop a shared leadership. \textbf{Methodology:} The understanding of PLC concepts and all related theories is derived from in-depth reading through primary sources, which are articles and journals. Through content analysis, the researcher explored types of strategies used in the implementation of PLC in higher institutions from previous studies. \textbf{Main Findings:} Consequently, Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a professional development program that has proven to be very successful abroad and become more popular in most countries. There are five Professional Learning Community (PLC) strategies: reflective dialogue, shared practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration and shared norms. \textbf{Applications of this study:} In a nutshell, PLC could be one of the best models to help lecturers or educators improve their professionalism, whereby, clear ideas, concepts and efficient strategies will support educators with learning improvement as well as students’ achievement. \textbf{Novelty/Originality of this study:} The findings suggest that educators
have to work together by writing common assessments, planning curriculum, identifying at-risk students, and problem solving to intervene for each student. During collaborative team meetings, educators share their concerns, reflect on their teaching strategies, and make decisions based on data so that the five proposed PLC strategies can be maximised for use in ensuring academic achievement will be implemented for all students.

**Key words:** Professional Learning Community (PLC); PLC strategies; culture, environment, academic achievement; Malaysia.

**Introduction**

An education institution is one of the main spurs in driving the development of a Country. Hence, national education systems need to be in line with current development in order to produce quality human capital and to function holistically, which is firmly holding onto religion (Nor Asma Sheirnawani et al., 2015). To form quality human beings, the national education system needs support from various angles including a dynamic and progressive strategy to ensure the mission and objectives are achieved. The educational mission statement promoted by the Ministry of Education in "Upholding a quality education system that develops individuals to their full potential and fulfils the aspirations of the nation" (Ministry of Education Portal Malaysia), clearly dreamed of the best system to develop such human capital. Educational institutions seem to be the best platform for realising this mission. As such, Professional Learning Community (PLC) has been adopted and accepted as one of the best and sustainable human capital development systems. This is because PLC contains several strategies that are considered as effective in enhancing students’ performance and achievement that eventually will turn them into a quality and excellent human resource who are able to be better leaders for the Country in the future (Badrul Hisham & Mohd. Nasaruddin, 2016).

Consequently, one of the most important components to produce excellent students is the teaching method often used by teachers. Teaching method is an element that needs to be applied and practiced so that it can impact on students which develops them to their full potential and achieve success (Nor Asma Sheirnawani et al., 2015). In the context of university, lecturers need to be proficient in teaching techniques and methods to help the students to learn better, especially to improve their language proficiency. Language plays an important role in communication to convey some information to others. Therefore, the method of teaching language through the implementation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is considered as appropriate in improving language learning processes (Tan et al., 2017) among students of public universities and institutes of teacher’s education (IPG).
A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a professional development program that has proven to be very successful abroad and has become more popular in most countries. On this basis, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia encourages this program to be adopted by any educational institutions in the Country. PLC refers to the professionalism practice among community members of the educational institutions; including primary, secondary, and tertiary. Institution members covers a wide and diverse scope. It involves everyone in the system; not only educators and students, but also staff, administrative board and stakeholders. The main goal of PLC is to improve the country's education system. In fact, improving the quality of education is an obligation and attention that must be taken by those who are involved in education directly or indirectly (Siti Nafsiah et al., 2018). Siti Nafsiah et al. (2018) stated that the best improvement will only take place if educators and faculty or ‘bottom-ups’ are tangled in the overall process of education that has been proposed. If this ‘bottom-up’ practice does not occur, it is worrying that it will continuously reduce the credibility and professionalism of the educators (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017; OLAOYE, ADEDEJI & AYENI-AGBAJE 2018). Hence, PLC can be a model that could help teachers or educators to improve their professionalism, whereby clear ideas, concepts and efficient strategies will be able to support educators for learning improvement and improved student achievement (Dehdary, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

In the context of education, many researchers define the Professional Learning Community as a practice or strategy that focuses on continuous improvement in students’ achievement (Dehdary, 2017; Intanam & Wongwanich, 2014; Smith, 2010) whereby education institutions are responsible for introducing and practicing this culture thoroughly and continuously. Dufour (2004) gave it a precise definition as an on-going process through which teachers and administrators work collaboratively to seek and share learning and to act on their learning goal to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for students' benefit (Dufour, 2004; Olowa, 2018).

Concept and Model of Professional Learning Community (PLC)

According to Ratts et al. (2015) and Roslizam et al. (2018), the concept of Professional Learning Community (PLC) was originally the idea of Dufour (2004). Dufour (2004) perceived that the workplace could be a positive and proactive learning organisation, whereby the concept of working together among the community members within the organisation was emphasised. Some of the learning organisation practices are: active
employees’ involvement in creating a shared vision, and a collaborative as well as supportive culture that enables them to work more effectively, especially in identifying and solving problems (Osman & Sentosa 2013; Intanam & Wongwanich, 2014). The concept of this learning organisation was extended by Astuto (1993) into the education system. It has been labelled by Astuto (1993) and colleagues as a Professional Learning Community model which refers to the interaction in which the teachers and the administrators in a school continuously seek and share learning, act on their learning and often exchange views and opinions regarding teaching and learning issues. The goal of this is to enhance the school members effectiveness as professionals for the students’ benefit. They explain that PLC is a group of professional people (such as teachers and school administrators) who create the learning culture, identify and develop adequate knowledge to be learned which is then (Bakar & Abdul Rasid, 2016; Dima Mazlina@Siti Aisahah, 2015). This learning model emphasises the concepts of professional cooperation and collaboration between members of educational institutions (either primary, secondary or tertiary).

Hord (1997; 2004) further refined Astuto et al.’s (1994) findings by adding some criteria that translated PLC’s practices into educational institutions. Hord (2004) suggested that the learning community culture is demonstrated when school community members practice giving, distributing and sharing knowledge amongst each other. This kind of cooperative and collaborative practice should be extended by involving parents to discuss students’ achievement through curriculum improvement activities and student learning programs (Jones, Stall, & Yarbrough, 2013).

**Special Features of Professional Learning Community**

The concept of PLC sparks Hord’s (2003) interest to create special features as the following:

i. Supportive and shared leadership
ii. Shared values and vision
iii. Collective learning and the application of that learning
iv. Shared practice
v. Supportive conditions for the maintenance of learning community.

Based on PLC’s features as described by Hord (2003), a continuous process of creating a learning culture is demonstrated, which supposedly starts from the educators themselves. In addition, the leadership style that Hord (2003) emphasised is more focused on an educators’ leadership, whereby educators will try to develop their own leadership skills through continuous and collective work execution. The outcome of the paper is to study the theory and concept of Professional Learning Community (PLC/KPP) and how it can be implemented through strategies to improve on students’ attainment in public universities and institutes of teacher education.
Methodolgy

The scope for identifying the PLC strategies considered in this review included: 1) PLC models and theory and 2) the dimensions of PLC strategies (Hord, 1997). It was restricted to include only those models or theories that can be delivered and implemented in the higher institution or school itself. The models and theories were chosen because there are differences in their use of terminology, dimensions and elements however they have the same goal: to create a learning organisation that encourages its members to keep learning to enhance self-professional development and consequently, realising the organisation’s goal. Since it was an important objective of this review to determine the concepts of PLC on the effectiveness of these strategies, the researcher drew on a broad range of evidence for that information. The dimensions demonstrated that it has been applied by other researchers in their academic research, for example, Bolam et al. (2005); Botha (2012); DuFour & Eaker (1998); Marzuki (2013); Musimartin (2014); and Wilson (2016).

Discussion

Professional Learning Community in the Institution of Education

Eventually, any new and better idea for a learning system that can bring huge change to an education institution will be introduced in that country. Based on this phenomenon, a model of educational institution enhancement that promises positive impact on student achievement has been proposed and applied in learning. The model is called the PLC. Even though most of the PLC's studies have been carried out at school level (primary and secondary), this model is also appropriate to be applied to the institutions of higher learning. This is because PLC covers education more broadly and is not tied to an institution alone.

In the context of higher education institutions, the methods and techniques that are commonly used are lecturer-centred or student-centered, resource-based or material-based learning, cooperative or collaborative learning, metacognitive learning, contextual teaching and so on. However, lecturers should be acting as an effective educators who are knowledgeable, skillful, and competent as well as able to generate new ideas in teaching and learning to improve students’ performance and achievement.

The Role of Educators as Leaders and Implementers of Professional Learning Community

The study conducted by Smith (2010) claims that instructors (lecturers/educators) need to re-educate themselves with pedagogical knowledge and curriculum, as well as understand their leadership actions every day. Classifying lecturer's leadership takes place in four zones:
inside the lecture room, in extra-curriculum activities, outside the lecture room in their
development, and in leadership activities between universities community. However, their
studies concluded that most leadership practices only take place in the lecture room. In the
context of the PLC, the role of lecturers as educators and leaders should be modified from
"change agents" to "change leaders" (Intanam & Wongwanich, 2014) and their scope of role
should be more diverse and dynamic.

In addition, Roslizam et al. (2018) believed that there are some values and features that make
certain individuals fit as effective educational leaders, such as: open-mindedness and
respectful of others, displaying confidence and firmness, flexibility, and willingness to try
different approaches if something is unsuccessful. Furthermore, they are willing to face
various risks such as time constraints and so on. However, they should bear in mind that the
leadership style of an instructor or educator is not the same as his/her colleagues and students.
Upholding the role of leadership requires educators to have expertise in curriculum planning,
assessment design, data analysis and so on. They also need to develop active listening skills,
facilitate meetings, and guard the discussion session during the meeting. Therefore, the PLC
model is very suitable in enabling lecturers to improve their leadership potential as well as
enhance their professionalism to be effective and competent educators.

The educators’ professional development of the PLC model emphasised the concept of
sharing and seeking new information. Even the professionalism of a lecturer is closely linked
to their job function however, Ismail, Ghani, & Abdullah (2014) claimed that efficiency and
accountability of an effective teacher requires competent educators to convey and deliver new
knowledge and skills to students. Furthermore, Jones et al. (2013) considered that competent
and professional educators should have the following approaches and skills: ability to
precisely plan the goals they want to achieve; build different levels of thinking; choose
appropriate materials followed by appropriate instructions; implement systematic directions;
spark the interest of students; start and dismiss the lesson accordingly; use technology and
information to create a joyful environment; emphasis on concepts; give good response;
manage student attitudes; regulate student understanding; and manage time systematically.
This criterion reflects the level of professionalism of an educator, especially lecturers at
higher learning institutions, which can ultimately stimulate a positive and effective learning
culture.

**Professional Learning Community Development Strategy**

DuFour (2004) argued that the PLC model demanded changes from educational processes
that focus on teaching to learning. This situation required thorough and systematic strategies
to ensure the teacher's teaching method is able to inspire and motivate students to love
learning. It should be consistent with the purpose of PLC itself which not only to ensure
students are taught but also learn ‘successfully’. In addition, DuFour (2004) suggested three key ideas to develop PLC culture which are necessary based on the PLC’s principles or strategies: 1) ensure that students learn, 2) create a collaborative culture, and 3) focus on the results. His theory suggests that the key success for PLC is to safeguard the rights of students to learn and study by creating a collaborative culture among community member of education institutions, whereby the institution will focus on the outcomes as the benchmark of PLC’s effectiveness (Zuraidah, 2014; Omae et al. 2016). This is for future improvement process. According to Absha Abthiah & Mohd. Isa (2019), the ideal strategy that should be undertaken to enhance professionalism in educational institutions is PLC.

**Professional Learning Community Strategies in Learning Language**

According to Dehdary (2017), the process of language learning required a strategy that contained cognitive and behavioural activities that are related to several levels, especially in the process of language proficiency or language usage. Strategies can be used as an initiative to understand and master language skills (Badrul Hisham & Mohd Nasaruddin, 2015; Tan et al., 2017; Promsri, 2018), as well as to improve the language learning itself. In the context of higher learning institutions, language learning improvement can generally be achieved through the five PLC strategies: reflective dialogue, shared practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms.

The first strategy is reflective dialogue. One of the PLC strategies under reflective dialogue is protocol discussion by conducting monthly meetings to discuss articles on various aspects of teaching and learning. Additionally, introducing a book club in which a group of educators will read, share and discuss on particular articles or books every month in order to make the language learning more relevant and dynamic. Indirectly, such learning processes can enhance the thinking skills and improve the communication skills of the educators. Additionally, the reflective dialogue strategy can also be done through instructional video criticism and effective teaching by observing and discussing other lecturer’s teaching video clips. This shared-dialogue will improve the perspective of lecturers on effective teaching and learning.

The second strategy is shared-practice. Among the practices are ‘Learning Walk’, ‘Lesson Study’ and sharing sessions. ‘Learning Walk’ is walking around the university by monitoring the teaching and learning from outside the classroom and focusing on the specific aspects such as effective teaching and learning practices that can adopted by other lecturers. Meanwhile, the supervision focuses on three steps to supervise a lecturer; 1) pre-supervision, 2) supervision, and 3) post supervision. The ‘Lesson Study’ aspect, refers to collaborative educators’ practices where a group of lecturers will provide a shared lesson plan, carry out the teaching and learning process and then make observations, discussions and
improvements. The last aspect is the sharing session where a group of lecturers meet regularly sharing the best practices. These lecturers will share the resources of teaching, expertise and experience, and student work among each other.

The third strategy is collective focus on student learning. Lecturers need to analyse data by reviewing the student’s achievement and make a discussion for any improvement. This strategy emphasises the aspects of preparation of syllabus description and teaching and learning activities that will be shared with students. After that, at least two supervisors will make a standardised assessment for shared-learning, planning, and assessment modification. They will choose one day to review and evaluate assignments that have been given to lecturers which focus on the nature and quality of teaching and learning.

The fourth strategy is collaboration. This strategy emphasises several aspects such as conducting a meeting frequently; leading a discussion that involves lecturers from the same group; leading a discussion that involves lecturers from different group; assisting or guiding new lecturers on aspects of pedagogy, procedure, and moral support; organizing a program that involves lecturers from all divisions, and exercising a discussion together to solve problems. This situation will create a very positive and harmonious outcome (Aziah, Loh, & Abdul Ghani, 2015; Dima Mazlina@Siti Aisahah, 2015). Hence, an excellent work culture can be applied within learning institutions as a result of cooperation and collaboration between lecturers (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017).

The last strategy is shared-norms and values. Sharing of norms refers to when a group of lecturers either from the same or different institutions, share the norms and values based on the best and up-to-date information, knowledge, experiences, skills, and teaching and learning practices. This involves planning together and it is compatible with the mission and vision of the institution. The sharing session is aimed to enhance the shared-knowledge among the members (lecturers), whereby they can learn better from each other in order to understand their professionalism and their environment (Ezwafahmey, 2018). This strategy needs guidelines to make decisions and actions for discussing the best values that should be embedded by each lecturer. Thus, it will be more meaningful and successful if the lecturers can adjust it according to the context and the atmosphere of the institution where they are working.

**Conclusion**

This study was carried out to review the past literature on concepts and theories used in the implementation of PLC among the educators. A higher learning institution that aims to achieve outstanding success requires a quality educational system to compete with the globalisation challenges. In addition, the lecturers’ leadership that grows with high self-
esteem and realises the importance of their existence as educators will also contribute to the quality that is desired by the Country. Therefore, the institution’s board and educators need to change. Hence, the concept of PLC is based on unity and integrity in carrying out duties and responsibilities - by practicing mutual aid, helping educators and administrator’s board and trust their capability - will create an awareness of an accountable working environment, especially in providing the best education for the younger generation. A new perception among educators toward the improvement of educational institutions should be formed. This idea should be compatible to the Country’s efforts in shaping the transformation agenda towards quality education that outlined under the National Key Result Area (NKRA). Therefore, PLC has been chosen by the Ministry of Education as a unique concept to shape the mindset of an institution’s community members as well as the teaching and learning practice.

However, the outcome of PLC practice requires educators to understand the PLC concept clearly, so that they can build an effective learning environment. In the context of language learning in higher learning institutions, PLC as a new approach needs to develop continuous learning activities more than concerns on the hierarchy between lecturers and students. By implementing the approach, the level of involvement in the process of knowledge enhancement among the community member of higher education institutions, especially lecturers, is high. It is evident that this model is also able to improve student achievement in general. The aspiration could be achieved if higher educational institutions take the initiative to introduce PLC to the community members accordingly. Nevertheless, the success of PLC is highly dependent on the support of various parties especially the leaders and other colleagues. Without their support in PLC practice, the PLC would fail. PLC could not be sustained long-term in an organisation and would be a seasonal practice. Therefore, for students’ academic excellence and success, leaders and educators should work together equally in practicing PLC in their organisation.

**Limitation and Study Forward**

This study is useful in social sciences and language teaching area where it shows that PLC is a potent platform for educators to build up good relationships with students and its effectiveness relies on appropriate division of learning between educators and students itself. Therefore, the study on PLC strategies are widely open in order to improve the effectiveness of its implementation in our classroom nowadays for a better future.

**Acknowledgement**

The researchers wish to thank the Research Management Centre, UPM for the University Research Grant (GP/2017/956400) that helped fund the study.
REFERENCES


