



Facilitating professional learning communities in China: Do leadership practices and faculty trust matter?

Hongbiao Yin ^{a,*}, Xin Zheng ^b

^a Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

^b Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

HIGHLIGHTS

- Leadership practices facilitated the building of professional learning communities.
- Leadership practices enhanced trust in colleagues and in the principal.
- Trust in colleagues positively mediated the effects of leadership practices.
- Trust in the principal negatively mediated the effects of leadership practices.
- Chinese cultural contexts matter in developing professional learning communities.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships between leadership practices, faculty trust, and professional learning communities in the context of mainland China. A total of 1,095 Chinese primary school teachers participated in a survey. The results showed that leadership practices had positive effects on faculty trust and professional learning communities. They further showed that trust in colleagues positively, whereas trust in the principal negatively, mediated the relationships between leadership practices and four components of professional learning communities. The negative mediation of trust in the principal may be attributed to Chinese cultural and contextual circumstances. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, research on professional learning communities (PLCs) has burgeoned in the international literature on teacher development and school improvement. Although consensus on the definition and components of PLCs has not been reached, there seems to be broad agreement that PLCs highlight teachers' collective efforts toward student learning and teacher development and that they encourage all professionals in schools to share and critically interrogate their practice in an ongoing, reflective, and growth-prompting way (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker,

2011; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Wang, 2015).

PLCs have been globally recognized for two main reasons. First, there is ample evidence that teachers in PLCs can effectively improve classroom teaching and thus enhance student achievement (Lomos et al., 2011; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Second, building PLCs in schools has the potential to improve school culture and strengthen schools' capacities for organizational learning (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Louis & Lee, 2016; Stoll et al., 2006). These well-documented and established effects explain the wide embrace of PLCs by policy makers, researchers, and practitioners all over the world.

PLCs do not come out naturally in schools. Previous studies have commonly identified two requirements for fostering and sustaining PLCs, i.e., school leadership and trust among school members (Hargreaves, 2007; Huffman et al., 2016; Stoll et al., 2006; Talbert,

* Corresponding author. R407, Ho Tim Bldg, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong SAR, China.

E-mail address: yinhb@cuhk.edu.hk (H. Yin).

2010; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). These two requirements, in Stoll and Louis's (2007) accounts, are the organizational and social prerequisites of PLCs in schools, respectively. School leadership provides appropriate organizational conditions that "promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing students' learning" (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005, p. ii). Meanwhile, "if we take seriously the call to extend professional learning communities ... the need to address social capital [becomes] even more imperative" (Stoll & Louis, 2007, pp. 7–8). Trust relationships among school members nurture and enhance social capital in schools (Penuel, Riel, Krause, & Frank, 2009).

To meet these requirements, some specific strategies have been suggested. First, leadership practices have been identified as pivotal for the creation of desirable school organizational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006). A number of empirical studies have examined the effect of principals' leadership practices on PLCs in schools though the results are inconsistent (e.g., Bryk et al., 1999; Hallinger, Lee, & Ko, 2014; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Second, faculty trust has been highlighted as the foundation of social capital and of interpersonal collaboration and school improvement (Cranston, 2011; Louis, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Following this line, some researchers have examined the effect of trust relationships among school members on PLCs in schools. Despite the positive role of faculty trust in facilitating PLCs (Zheng, Yin, Liu, & Ke, 2016; Cranston, 2011; Liu, Hallinger, & Feng, 2016), divergent results were also reported in several studies (e.g., Hallinger et al., 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

For Chinese educators, the concept of a PLC is imported from the Anglo-American world, but the professional development of teachers in China has long been a collective effort. In the 1950s, China learned from the experiences of teacher development in the Soviet Union and established its own nationwide teaching research system. Since then, China has advocated teacher collaboration as a way to facilitate teachers' professional development in schools (Wong, 2010a). As Zheng et al. (2016) and Zheng, Yin, & Li (2018) pointed out, teachers in China are accustomed to working together and participating in regular collective activities such as collective lesson preparation (*jiti beike*) and demonstration lessons (*gongkaike*). The principles of PLCs have been deeply embedded in Chinese teachers' collective work in subject-based departments (*xuekezu*) and teaching research groups (*jiaoyanzu*). Even in China's resource-constrained rural regions, such as Gansu, PLCs still thrive, and teachers participate in collaborative activities, which greatly facilitates the professional development of teachers and the diffusion of pedagogical innovations in China (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). Thus, when the concept of a PLC was explained to front-line practitioners in China, typical responses were "we do not use the term 'PLC,' but we are doing it" and "we rarely use the term 'professional learning community' but implement its key principles in practice" (Wang, 2016, p. 208).

Research on PLCs has increased notably in mainland China in the past decade (Qiao, Yu, & Zhang, 2017), but most studies concern the characteristics of PLCs (Wang, 2015; Wong, 2010a; Zhang & Pang, 2016a) or their roles in promoting teacher development and curriculum innovation (Sargent & Hannum, 2009; Wong, 2010b). In addition, although some studies have explored the factors influencing PLCs in Chinese schools (Wang, 2016; Wong, 2010a; Zhang & Pang, 2016b; Zhang, Yuan, & Yu, 2017), with rare exceptions (Zheng et al., 2016, 2018; Liu et al., 2016), few have done so using quantitative research methods.

Following the suggestions of previous studies (Hargreaves, 2007; Huffman et al., 2016; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Talbert, 2010; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008), this study advances the

research into PLCs by conducting a quantitative investigation into the organizational and social conditions influencing PLCs in Chinese schools. Specifically, this study examines the relationships between PLCs, the principal's leadership practices, and faculty trust (i.e., trust among colleagues and between teachers and their principal) in primary schools in mainland China.

In short, this study aims to address three gaps in the existing PLC research. First, although the relevance of school leadership to a PLC has been widely recognized (e.g., Hargreaves, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stoll & Louis, 2007), the results of empirical studies are inconsistent (e.g., Zheng et al., 2018; Hallinger et al., 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijssels, 2011). The present study attempts to clarify this issue. Unlike the previous studies which usually concern some specific leadership models, this study focuses on leadership practices which are suggested as "the basics" of good and necessary leadership for principals in different school contexts (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2006). Therefore, the findings of this study can broadly inform readers in various educational systems.

Second, although relational trust is established through the interactions between trustors and specific trustees (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), very few researchers distinguish the effects of trust in different stakeholders of schooling on PLCs in schools (e.g., Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Given that the quantitative research on the relationship between relational trust and PLCs is far from mature, this study may help clarify the roles of different types of faculty trust in facilitating PLCs by examining the effects of faculty trust in colleagues and that in the principal simultaneously.

Third, as Stoll et al. (2006) pointed out more than a decade ago, PLCs may be interpreted differently in various educational contexts. However, the influence of cultural and contextual forces on PLCs has rarely been explored until recently (Lomos, 2017; Pang & Wang, 2016; Wang, 2015), and hence the issue of facilitating PLCs in non-Western societies is largely unknown. The present study contributes to this emerging research issue by providing some quantitative evidence about PLCs in Chinese schools.

Today, the development of PLCs, either in Anglo-American cultures like the US and the UK, or in Chinese cultures like China and Singapore, has been considered an effective strategy for coping with the increasing emphasis on accountability and proven methods of the large-scale, standard-based education reforms (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). As Hargreaves (2013) pointed out, in this age of data-driven improvement and accountability, "improved learning outcomes for students and incessant attention to reform implementation sit in an uneasy relationship besides one another and are each subsumed by the same technology of PLCs" (p. 219). Therefore, findings of this study can inform not only Chinese but also international educators in facilitating PLCs in school contexts.

2. Literature

2.1. PLC and its components

The concept of a PLC derives from the research on learning organization (Senge, 1990) and communities of practice (Wenger, 2000). In the literature, "PLC" and "professional community" have often been used interchangeably, but educational practitioners are more familiar with PLC (DuFour & DuFour, 2010; Louis et al., 2010).

Although there are various accounts of the components of PLCs in the literature (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997; Lomos et al., 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008), all these accounts think highly of the role of a principal's leadership practices in providing favorable structural conditions for PLCs in schools. For example, Hord (1997) defined a PLC as a professional community of

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