



Exploring the relationship between school-level teacher qualifications and teachers' perceptions of school-based professional learning community practices



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The link between school-level teacher qualifications and school-based professional learning community in ECE was examined.
- The relationship between school-level teacher qualification and school-based PLC activities was significant.
- As the percentage of bachelor degree holders increased, the level of teachers' perceptions of the PLC activities increased.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between school-level teacher qualifications and school-based professional learning community (PLC) practices in Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong. A territory-wide survey examined how preschool teachers perceived shared responsibility, reflective dialogues, deprivatized practices and organizational learning. The findings suggest a significant relationship between school-level teacher qualifications and teachers' perceptions of school-based PLC practices. As the percentage of bachelor degree holders in preschools increases, teachers are more positive about PLC practices in their perceptions. This study establishes a platform for future studies focusing on structural relationships between teacher qualifications and school-based PLC practices.

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1. Introduction

Poor levels of qualifications among teachers in early childhood education (ECE) often raise concerns about the quality of teaching and learning. Upgrading teacher qualifications has been a priority on the policy agenda in many countries, including the USA, UK, Singapore, and Korea (OECD, 2011). Continuing professional development (CPD) has also been used as a key strategy to enhance teachers' professional learning in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Huffman, 2011). In general, CPD

refers to those opportunities provided for teachers to update and enhance their educational practices. It is often associated with “in-service training”, “continuing education” or “professional training” (OECD, 2012). In the past, CDP programs that took place in universities, or were offered by experts, mainly focused on transmitting knowledge about teaching and developing the skills of teaching. In the majority of cases, programs were not closely aligned with real student needs and school goals. More recently, there has been a shift away from knowledge transmission and toward a professional learning approach on the part of universities and professional organizations (Maxfield, Ricks-Doneen, Klocko, & Sturges, 2011; Schwartz, Lawson, Masters, & Milillo, 2009). A considerable body of literature has argued that collaborative, inquiry-based and practice-focused approach, where learning in the school is an integral part of school life, is more

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effective for school improvement (e.g. Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza, 2011; Priestley, Miller, Barret & Wallace, 2011; McGarr & McCormack, 2014). Effective CPD, as a tool for teachers' professional learning, focuses on student outcomes, collaborative practice, and is tied to school-based development (Lieberman & Miller, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). This changing view of teachers' professional learning suggests the need to broaden our concept of CDP and see it in the context of school-based development (Stoll & Louis, 2007). The practice of a professional learning community (PLC) has emerged as a sustainable form of CDP. A PLC should be an integral part of a school's efforts, and is formed to enhance teachers' professional learning in order to address the need for school improvement (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Although there is no consensus on the definition of a school-based PLC, it generally refers to "a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p. 2).

Recent research has shown that a PLC is a promising direction for future school reforms (Sargent & Hannum, 2009; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). PLCs have become a major focus of study and research in teachers' professional learning (Hargreaves, 2007; Lee & Kim, forthcoming). However, relatively little is known about the relationship between the level of qualifications among the teachers in a school (school-level teacher qualifications) and the development of a school-based PLC. In the context of early childhood education (ECE), there is a lack of research addressing the relationship between school-level teacher qualifications and school-based PLCs. Meta-analysis has found that specialized teacher training has a positive effect on the competence of early childhood teachers, but the effects observed are limited to teachers' knowledge, attitudes and skills (Fukkink & Lont, 2007). As noted above, given that the level of teachers' formal education is a critical component of a high-quality early childhood education (OECD, 2011), the relationship between school-level teacher qualifications and the development of a school-based PLC needs to be investigated.

We chose Hong Kong ECE as a research site because the upgrading of teacher qualifications has been under way since 1997, as one of the major reform measures in Hong Kong. Historically, the local ECE sector has long been characterized by minimal teacher education. In the past, no professional preparation was required for entry into a teaching career in ECE. Since 1997, the local government has increased investment in improving teacher qualifications. Local universities have provided teacher education programs (both pre-service and in-service) at different levels ranging from the higher diploma (which is the basic requirement for professional registration) to postgraduate levels. As a result, the range of qualifications held by currently practicing ECE teachers varies from preschool to preschool. Therefore, Hong Kong ECE is a research site that can provide rich information about the relationship between school-level teacher qualifications¹ (the proportion of registered teachers who hold bachelor-level or higher qualification within individual preschools) and teachers' perceptions of school-based PLC practices in different sizes of preschools (i.e. small, medium and large preschools, measured by the size of their staff). Knowledge about the relationship between the qualifications of staff and their perceptions toward PLC practices will contribute to

discussions about necessary policies to promote professionalism in ECE contexts.

2. A school-based professional learning community (PLC)

Teachers are the agents of change for student development and school improvement. One key to improving schools is fostering professional learning in which teachers develop their practice and build learning communities (Walker, 2009). High-quality professional learning can foster a collaborative and collegial culture that enables teachers to learn from each other and to improve their teaching practice for better student outcomes, working together for school improvement (Sachs, 2003). Researchers have long argued that schools are a key venue for professional learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000). In schools, teachers have the opportunity to co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning in an authentic context (Maloney & Konza, 2011). Teachers learn best about teaching by examining their students' work in collaboration with other teachers (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Hadar & Brody, 2013). Teachers can group together to support classroom action research that aims at improving the quality of teaching practice (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Researchers have conceptualized all these and similar practices as PLCs. DuFour (2004) highlights the importance of professional learning as a key component in creating PLCs. Echoing DuFour's research, Mullen (2009, p.18) conceptualizes PLCs as "a specific model of organizational development and learning for schools that has as its ultimate aim student learning". Researchers also appear to have a shared perspective on PLCs as interactive learning practices among adults in schools, based on the collective support of school members, which aim to enhance teaching practices and knowledge, student learning outcomes and school improvement (Stoll & Louis, 2007).

In recent years, the scope of research on PLCs has been extended from school-based PLCs to PLCs formed outside schools (Jackson & Temperley, 2007). For analytic reasons, our focus in this article is on school-based PLCs. Researchers have documented two unique components of school-based PLCs that contribute to school improvement: professional community among teachers and organizational learning (Lee, Louis, & Anderson, 2012; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Stoll et al., 2006). The concept of school-based PLCs originally emerged from the concept of the teacher professional community which can be traced back to the 1980s. Later, another organizational feature, called "organizational learning", (Senge, 2013) was added to the concept of a professional community, resulting in the coining of the term "PLC."

Teachers' professional community can be characterized as having three interdependent characteristics: shared responsibility, de-privatized practices and reflective dialogue (Lee et al., 2012; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Shared responsibility refers to teachers' collective sense of contributing to students' learning opportunities and outcomes beyond their own classrooms. As Burgess and Bates (2009) point out, shared responsibility is built on the structural and cultural interdependence of staff members when performing their duties. For this reason, shared responsibility is viewed as the backbone of teacher leadership (Pellicer & Anderson, 1995). De-privatized practice refers to the open sharing of classroom management, pedagogical approaches and teaching practices through formal and informal invitations of colleague teachers. The aim is to stimulate subsequent discussion and feedback. As McLaughlin and Talbert (2006, p.7) point out, de-privatized practice

¹ The term "School-level Teacher Qualifications" refers to the qualification profile of registered teachers of a preschool.

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