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Why Cambodia should build Professional Learning Communities (PLC) at all educational establishments?

Bunrith Suon & Sam Sideth Dy

Correspondence Author | Bunrith Suon, **Department of Policy** | E-mail: rithsb@gmail.com

Introduction

The purposes of having this Policy Brief is to draw attention to ensure that all players in education sectors have strong knowledge and skills to improve their working results. The intent is to create PLC at all school levels and the teaching training institutions such as Teacher Education Colleges (TEC), National Institute of Education (NIE), Regional Teacher Training Centers (RTTCs) and Provincial Teacher Training Centers (PTTCs) to establish Professional Learning Communities (PLC) by subjects and areas of specializations.

Vision of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport is to establish and develop human resources that are of the very highest quality and are ethically sound in order to develop a knowledge-based society within Cambodia as sited in the Education Strategic Plan, 2019-2023. In order to develop such a high quality of human resources responsive to the socio-economic development and labor market needs, quality of teachers and quality of teacher educators with effective school managers and teacher education institution directors is prerequisite to enhance the quality of teaching and learning of all students and teacher trainees at their respective establishments.

Students of the 21st century must be taught by teachers of the 21st century and facilitated and managed by school leaders of the 21st century as science and technology are rapidly flown into society and economy binding us all in which is hard to resist this change. The solution to the unforeseeable knowledge and skills is to enable learning for all in education system and flexible teaching and learning contents adjusting to emerging issues. Hence creation of learning society through development of professional learning communities at school and all education providers is key to enhance capacity of the teachers and staff of education service sector.

Global perspectives on learning management for professional development is to start with building a strong school culture with a learning organizational behavior toward improving school effectiveness (Russell, 2008; Fullan, 2008). People learn from other people, share with other, and together with other create new ideas and solutions to the problems they face (Fullan, 2008). Hence, the opportunity for learning has to be created for all teachers and school administrators to improve their practices and services toward better student's satisfactions and learning outcomes. Professional learning community or sometimes called community of practice has been instrumental to for continuous professional developments in various schools in various countries and Asia, America and Europe (Lam, 2004).

The Concept

Professional Learning Community (PLC) is widely used to build capacity of teachers and school leaders to manage change and improve capacity of learning and teaching. PLC idea is to facilitate learners to come together in a group—a community—to learn with and learn from each other. The form of the group can be named differently such as lesson study group like in the case of Japan and technical meeting of professionals to discuss issues and seek improvement such as in some developing countries. The group can be named differently and with diversity and flexibility of tasks and responsibilities. What we need to ensure is that we should have a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching/lecturing skills and the academic performance of teacher trainees/students. The term is also applied to schools or teaching faculty members that use small-group collaboration as a form of continuous professional development. Thus to be consistent with other developed world, PLC should be established in school, teacher education provider and education organization for the benefits of teachers as we consider teaching is not just a job, but a profession that we shall keep teachers to stay professional in all tasks and their daily practices.

Why should we establish PLC in Cambodia?

To serve to two broad purposes: (1) improving the skills and knowledge of educators through collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialogue, and (2) improving the educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment of students through stronger leadership and teaching. PLCs often function as a form of action research as a way to continually question, reevaluate, refine, and improve teaching strategies and knowledge. Meetings are goal-driven exchanges facilitated by educators who have been trained to lead PLCs. Participation in meetings may be entirely voluntary or requirements that all faculty members participate. Facilitators of the PLC are important role players to ensure the PLC run well toward the goals and the learning outcomes.

In schools, action research refers to a wide variety of evaluative, investigative, and analytical research methods designed to diagnose problems or weaknesses—whether organizational, academic, or instructional—and help educators develop practical solutions to address them quickly and efficiently. Action research may also be applied to programs or educational techniques that are not necessarily experiencing any problems, but that educators simply want to learn more about and improve. The general goal is to create a simple, practical, repeatable process of iterative learning, evaluation, and improvement that leads to increasingly better results for schools, teachers, or programs.

The Context

There are approximately 14,500 schools from pre-schools to upper secondary schools with about 3.3 million enrolling in the 12-year education system taught by roughly 92,300 teachers. Newly trained teachers are around 3,500 per year to be deployed to these schools after their graduation and successfully recruited through standardized system at 16 provincial teacher training centers, 4 regional teacher training centers, 2 teacher education colleges and 1 pre-school teacher training center and 1 national institute of education. Key success of the these education establishments rely heavily on teachers, teacher educators and lecturers as well as the institutional managers and leaders of those establishments.

Global trends and issues require students with 21st century skills and the roles of teachers and educators are to enable students to know how to learn and how to search for sources of information and to wisely utilize the information effectively for their development. The roles of schooling have to be adjusted to the concept of learning organizations in which lifelong learning environment shall be for both personal and professional improvement to better serve the school to achieve its strategic plan

of high quality service recognized by community and society to those who spend a particular number of years at school either at primary or secondary school level.

Having observed to the context of Cambodia despite technical meeting and cluster school systems exist to support professional learning for teachers and school administrators. Lacking of support mechanisms for teachers and other related education personnel for their professional development in terms of having a regular platforms or institutions for them to refer to for their professional development and growth, causing low quality of tasks given by institutional authorities given to them at their respective workplace. Lesson Study concept introduced by the Japanese were introduced in late 2000s and scaled up to various schools in early 2010s with good results under the JICA projects. In line with the movement of building knowledge-based society and enhance quality of teaching a learning group of professionals should be established accordingly.

How PCL is managed?

In each educational establishment either school or teacher training institution should build a strong learning team for professional growth of all staff. PLC, when effectively operated can reduce misunderstanding and prevent conflicts in the work place as well as dealing with issues and enhance capacity of staff. PLC should be inspired to be established after all members fully understand the concept, usefulness and benefit of having it. The institutional managers and leaders should propose and support staff with same subjects or same grade they teach at school to team up and if the number of the members are too small, they may reach out to other network or nearby school to bind into a group with strong support from the school leader and facilitator to ensure the workplan and agenda for the group meeting.

In PLC, teams are often built around shared roles or responsibilities. For example, the teachers/educators in a particular group may all teach the first year students/trainees or they may all teach science, and these shared attributes allow participants to focus on specific problems and strategies—How do I teach *this* particular student better? How do I teach *this* scientific theory more effectively?—rather than on general educational goals or theories. Teachers, for example, will discuss and reflect on their instructional techniques, lesson designs, and [assessment](#) practices, while administrators may address leadership questions, strategies, and issues.

Members of PLC

Given the significant roles of the school directors and school management committee in nurturing school improvement and responsive education to the communities. Organizational learning has been reconceptualized to create learning environment at educational establishments to correct the past errors and ensure best practices through changing behaviors using new insights and knowledge generated from the process of information-gathering and sense-making (Lam, 2004). Hence, all education personnel working at school and at the TTI such as teacher educators/trainers, directors, school leaders and teachers. They can also be members of any other kinds of learning and research for development communities such as professional society or associations and community of practice for their professional support and development beyond their place of work.

Going beyond PLC, we should consider developing of learning society for Cambodia to build stronger relationships among university, teacher education providers, research and consultancy providers and schools are key to enable effective flow of learning among all professionals.

Those professional education societies – as annual gathering and professional development forum with journals and conference proceedings to be produced as achievements from PLC there may be name as follows.

- Professional Society for teachers by area of focus/subject
- Community of Practice for School Directors/TTC Directors

- School director association/council
- Comparative Education Society, Cambodia
- Education Research Society/Community

Conclusion

PLC is a platform to be created at school and other educational organization to exercise knowledge and skills in group through sharing and learning from one another. Effective PLC requires effective management and facilitation by all members and the school administrators to ensure the professional growth of all members. School directors are reform leaders in building stronger school management system and ensuring the structural flow of communications and learning opportunity. Stronger school culture comprises strong learning community in which teachers and school leaders develop their capacity continuously and create mentoring and coaching system. The PLC cannot be well managed without leadership and constant support of the school management committee as well as the authority overlooking the school.

School improvement strategies cannot neglect establishment of PLC. School effectiveness requires strong school-based management strategies with all members of the school including students and parent-teacher association. Thus, having PLC is to create platform for teachers and school leaders to interact personally and professionally with one another for their self-development for school improvement and PLC shall serve its core mission to encourage teachers and school leaders to learn from and learn with each other to enhance their work capacity for growth in order to support students to achieve their learning needs.

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