

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The study systematically reviews the literature to understand the key success factors for school leadership in fostering PLCs and the most effective leadership style for this endeavor. Through a detailed analysis, it identifies key success factors such as visionary leadership, shared values, effective communication, collaborative decision-making, and strategic problem-solving. The study also emphasized the transformative, facilitative, distributed, democratic, and situational leadership styles conducive to PLC success. These elements are essential for creating a collaborative learning environment that promotes professional growth, innovation, and improved student outcomes. The study acknowledges limitations including the scope of literature and challenges in directly correlating leadership styles with PLC success. Future research directions include exploring the long-term impact of leadership on PLCs, cross-contextual comparisons, empirical validations of theoretical frameworks, and the role of digital technologies in PLC enhancement.

Keywords: Leadership; Professional Learning Communities; Learning Environment

INTRODUCTION

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are integral in fostering a collaborative environment where educators can share knowledge and practices that contribute to their professional growth and instructional leadership. This collective efficacy is shown to positively influence not only teacher performance but also student outcomes by promoting more effective teaching strategies and enriched learning experiences (Khun-Inkeeree, et al., 2022). They suggest that empowering teachers through active involvement in school goals and fostering a supportive school atmosphere of all stakeholders are vital for enhancing the effectiveness of PLCs. This complexity underscores the importance of a thorough understanding of PLCs, including their theoretical underpinnings and the myriad of factors that affect their effectiveness, to fully leverage their potential in educational enhancement.

The success of PLCs is closely tied to school leadership. The way leaders support, guide, and foster PLCs significantly impacts their effectiveness and sustainability. Research underscores the importance of leadership in creating an environment that encourages the growth and development of PLCs, focusing on aspects such as support, vision sharing, collective learning, and administrative assistance. For instance, Jafar et al. (2022) illustrates how transformational leadership, characterized by fostering professional growth, respect, and shared responsibility, greatly enhances PLC effectiveness. Furthermore, Chua et al. (2020) highlight the necessity of administrative backing, such as allocating time and resources for PLC activities, to sustain these initiatives over time, pointing out that teacher efforts alone may not suffice for long-term success. This emphasis on school support as a cornerstone for cultivating a PLC-friendly culture within educational settings is crucial. Navigating the intersection of school leadership and PLC implementation leads to vital inquiries: What are the key success factors for school leadership in fostering PLCs, and what is the most effective leadership style for this endeavor? Addressing these questions is imperative to identify the core attributes and strategies of school leaders that promote the growth of PLCs. Understanding how leadership influences PLC success is key to determining best practices for nurturing a collaborative, learning-focused school environment that benefits educators and students alike. Through this exploration, we can better appreciate the role of leadership in elevating educational experience through the support and advancement of Professional Learning Communities.

This study offers invaluable insights into how effective leadership can transform educational environments, promoting a culture of continuous learning, collaboration, and shared vision among educators. By pinpointing the crucial factors and leadership styles that most significantly impact the success of PLCs, educational stakeholders can develop targeted strategies to support and enhance these communities. The implications of these studies extend beyond academic theory. For practitioners, understanding the role of leadership in facilitating PLCs provides a roadmap for implementing actionable changes within schools and districts. This roadmap calls for a shift in how educational policies and practices are framed. For policymakers, the findings underscore the necessity of designing and implementing policies that encourage and enable school leadership to adopt practices supportive of PLCs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles have been the focus of extensive research over the years, with scholars identifying various approaches that leaders use to guide, influence, and manage their followers. Understanding these styles is crucial for effective leadership and organizational success. Here, we explore some of the most influential theories and their proponents.

- Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership is defined as a style where the leader makes decisions unilaterally without much input from group members. Autocratic leaders typically do not seek input from team members and have clear, central control over all decisions. The leader is the sole authority and keeps a significant distance from group members in the decision-making process (Luqman, et. al., 2019). Autocratic leadership is characterized by individual control over all decisions without much input from others. Leaders make choices based on their own beliefs and do not involve others in decision making. This style is used in situations where control must be maintained and is seen as less effective in driving motivation and creativity among team members (Jony, et. al., 2019).

- Democratic Leadership

Agarwal (2019) described democratic leadership as a leadership style where the leader holds a central position, but decision-making is delegated to subordinates to enhance their involvement and association with the organization. This style is characterized by high levels of employee participation in the decision-making process, which fosters a more dynamic and engaged work environment. Under democratic leadership, the leader remains responsible for the final decisions but ensures that all team members can contribute ideas and opinions, which are valued and considered. His findings emphasize that this leadership style is particularly effective in environments that require frequent adaptation and innovation, as it promotes a collaborative and motivated workforce.

- Laissez-faire Leadership

Gehani, et. al. (2019) defines Laissez-faire leadership as a non-transactional type of leadership characterized by a high degree of non-involvement. Leaders employing this style typically avoid making decisions until necessary, often delaying responses to important issues and abstaining from intervening in organizational matters unless required. This approach reflects a general disengagement from leadership responsibilities, leading to a lack of direct supervision and guidance for subordinates. Their research found that this style results in less effective organizational and team performance, as it lacks the active engagement and directive approach that might be necessary to motivate and guide employees effectively. The laissez-faire style was associated with the lowest scores in leadership effectiveness among the styles analyzed, indicating that it may not foster an environment conducive to achieving high performance or addressing organizational challenges proactively.

- Situational Leadership

Francisco, et. al. (2020) defined situational leadership as a leadership style that emphasizes the ability of leaders to adapt their style to the requirements of different situations, particularly during significant challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept explores how leaders must adjust their strategies and decision-making processes based on the

evolving circumstances and the unique needs of their team and the broader organizational context. They highlighted the ability of leaders to transform their approach to address the immediate needs of their educational institutions effectively, suggesting that situational leadership during crises involves a dynamic and flexible response to unprecedented conditions.

- **Transactional Leadership (Burns, 1978)**

James MacGregor Burns introduced the concept of transactional leadership in 1978, contrasting it with transformational leadership. Transactional leaders focus on the exchange that takes place between leaders and followers. They guide or motivate their followers in the direction of established goals by clarifying role and task requirements. This style involves contingent rewards and corrective actions to achieve objectives.

- **Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985)**

Bernard M. Bass further expanded the understanding of leadership styles in 1985 with his theory of transformational leadership. This style is characterized by the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate followers to achieve outstanding results and to see beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group or organization. Transformational leaders are often charismatic, enthusiastic, and passionate.

Transformational leadership is described as a leadership style where the leader directs and supports activities in ways that inspire and motivate employees to achieve higher performance. It emphasizes the ability of leadership to bring about change in individuals and organizations, aiming to produce higher performance through correct work motivation (Marlina, et. al., 2023).

- **Facilitative Leadership**

According to Nordick, et. al. (2019), facilitative leadership is characterized by behaviors that promote collaboration, support, and guidance rather than control. Facilitative leaders focus on enabling teams to achieve their objectives through empowerment and by providing the necessary resources. They guide processes and encourage participation and engagement from all team members, ensuring that everyone's contributions are valued. This leadership style is particularly effective in settings where the leader's role is to foster open communication, problem-solving, and collective decision-making. Nordick, et. al. (2019) highlight how facilitative leadership significantly impacts collective teacher efficacy in schools. It shows that when school leaders employ facilitative methods—such as involving teachers in decision-making, providing clear and consistent communication, and supporting teacher autonomy—the collective efficacy of teachers improves. This, in turn, enhances overall school performance, teacher collaboration, and student achievement. Facilitative leadership is presented as a catalyst for creating a positive and proactive educational environment.

- **Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership is conceptualized by Çoban, et. al. (2020) as an interactive process involving leaders, followers, and their situational contexts. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration, cooperation, and authority sharing within schools. Principals practicing distributed leadership empower teachers and engage various stakeholders in decision-making processes, fostering a collaborative and innovative school climate. Distributed leadership positively impacts organizational innovativeness directly and indirectly through enhanced teacher collaboration (Çoban, et. al., 2020). Their findings personality, and

the characteristics of the followers and the organization. The study of leadership styles remains to suggest that principals who practice distributed leadership contribute to a supportive and innovative school environment, promoting collaboration and new ideas among teachers.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

According to Tabak, et. al. (2020), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are described as groups of educators who collaborate to improve their teaching practices and enhance student learning. PLCs are characterized by shared practices in a continuous, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, and learning-oriented environment, promoting growth and allowing for critical questioning. The transformation into a PLC is seen as essential for achieving school effectiveness.

The findings from Olsson (2019) emphasize that PLCs significantly enhance both teaching practices and student learning outcomes when they are well-implemented. Educators in effective PLCs experience professional growth through collaborative learning and are more likely to innovate in their instructional approaches. The study suggests that schools with strong PLCs see improved academic performance among students, as the collaborative approach allows teachers to share strategies and solutions that address students' needs effectively.

According to Prenger, et. al. (2019) the success factors of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) encompass several key characteristics that facilitate effective collaboration and learning among educators. Reflective dialogue is crucial, allowing teachers to engage in meaningful professional discussions about educational topics that matter. Derivatization of practice encourages teachers to observe one another's teaching methods, providing and receiving feedback aimed at instructional improvement. Collaborative activity is another cornerstone, highlighting the importance of teachers working together within the PLC framework. Shared goals ensure that all members align with the mission and principles of the PLC or school, fostering a unified approach to education. Lastly, a collective focus on student learning emphasizes the shared commitment among teachers to enhance student achievement, which is the aim of any educational endeavor. These elements together create a robust environment for sustained teacher development and improved educational outcomes.

RESEARCH METHOD

Table 1. Articles

File Name	Author and Year	Title	Journal	Purpose	Method
SL1	Juladis Khanthap	Innovative Leadership Factors and Leader Characteristics that Affecting Professional Learning Community of Primary Schools in Bangkok and Its Vicinity	World Journal of Education	To investigate the innovative leadership factors and leader characteristics of school administrators in affecting teachers' involvement in the professional learning community of primary education schools in Bangkok and its vicinity of Thailand.	Quantitative approach survey research design employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

File Name	Author and Year	Title	Journal	Purpose	Method
SL2	Aydin Balyer, Hakan Karatasa, Bulent Alci	School Principals' Roles in Establishing Collaborative Professional Learning Communities at Schools	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	To present what principal roles in establishing professional learning communities are in the current system.	Qualitative study utilizing ethnographic designs and in-depth interviews.
SL3	Sakineh Hobbi Ghratapeh, Mohamad Hassani, Hassan Ghalavandi, Abolfazl Ghasemzadeh Alishahi	Analyzing Challenges and Obstacles to the Leadership Professional Learning Communities in Schools and Identifying Strategies for Addressing the Obstacles: A Mixed Approach	Journal of School Administration communities in high challenges	To investigate the challenges to leadership of professional learning	Mixed approach with both qualitative and quantitative
SL4	Mohd Izham Mohd Hamzah, Mohd Fadzil Jamil	Distributed Leadership and Its Relation to Professional Learning Community	Creative Education	To examine the relationship of distributed leadership of secondary school administrators with professional learning community	To examine the relationship of distributed leadership of secondary school administrators with professional learning community

After determining the research questions, the study focuses on literature related to research articles. Using the keywords: "Professional Learning Community," "School Leadership", "School Principal", and "school-based PLCs", relevant articles that discussed how school leaders implemented PLCs were identified. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to refine the selection. The inclusion criteria are articles that study the PLC practices within school settings, published between 2019-2024, written in English, and open access. Eighteen articles were identified. The exclusion criteria are articles focusing on PLCs outside of school environments, primarily emphasizing teacher collaboration within PLCs and the correlation with student achievement. Three articles were selected: SL1, SL2, SL3, and SL4.

The data extraction process was conducted on the four selected articles as shown in table 1. Using deductive coding, key themes and themes as shown in table 2, were collected based on the data (Xiao, et. al., 2019). Finally, the extracted data and themes were analyzed and synthesized, involving comparing the findings with the underlying theories of Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents a comprehensive data extraction that systematically captures the essence

and impact of different leadership styles on the development and sustainability of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within educational environments. This detailed examination delves into key thematic areas, including innovative leadership practices, effective characteristics of leaders, the pivotal role of shared leadership and decision-making, and the integral features of PLCs themselves. Table 2 offers valuable insights into how leadership can influence the effectiveness of PLCs, providing a rich foundation for understanding the dynamic interplay between leadership practices and the cultivation of collaborative professional learning environments.

Table 2. Data Extraction

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Found in	Emergence
Innovative Leadership	Vision and Strategy	Leaders must possess a forward-looking vision and strategic approach to foster an innovative learning environment.	SL1	Emerged through statistical analysis highlighting the positive impact of innovative leadership practices on PLC engagement.
	Risk Management	Effective handling of risks and uncertainties to ensure the continuous growth of PLCs.	SL1	Identified via discussions on the challenges faced by leaders and strategies to mitigate these risks.
Leader Characteristics	Effective Communication	The ability of leaders to communicate effectively, ensuring clear understanding and alignment with PLC goals.	SL1	Derived from a model linking leader communication skills with successful PLC implementation.
	Active Participation	Leaders' involvement in PLC activities, serving as role models for continuous learning.	SL1	Highlighted through qualitative analysis of leadership behaviors that promote a strong PLC culture.
Shared Leadership and Decision Making	Collaborative Environment	Creating an environment that supports shared leadership, encouraging teacher involvement in decision making.	SL2 SL3	Emerged from discussions on the impact of distributed leadership on PLC success.
	Empowerment and Ownership	Empowering teachers to take ownership of the PLC process, enhancing motivation and commitment.	SL2 SL3	Emerged from discussions on the impact of distributed leadership on PLC success.
Professional Learning Community Features	Shared Values and Vision	The importance of establishing a collective focus on student learning and achievement	SL4	Derived from analyses demonstrating a correlation between shared values and PLC effectiveness.
	Supportive Conditions	Ensuring the presence of conditions that support	SL4	Identified through descriptive statistics

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Found in	Emergence
		collaborative work and professional growth		showing the role of supportive leadership in fostering a conducive PLC environment.

Key Success Factors for School Leadership in Fostering PLCs

The Key Success Factors of School Leadership in Fostering Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be analyzed through various themes and sub-themes highlighted in table 2. The leadership of PLCs is tied to theoretical frameworks such as Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice. Successful leadership requires an integrated approach that encompasses innovative vision, shared values, effective communication, collaborative decision-making, and strategic problem-solving. This comprehensive approach is designed to foster a dynamic, engaging, and impactful learning community focused on collective growth and achievement.

Effective leadership transcends mere administration, embedding itself into the very fabric of educational innovation and shared purpose. Innovative leadership, marked by a visionary outlook and strategic risk management, forms the cornerstone of nurturing PLCs. Leaders are tasked with navigating the complexities of educational reform while maintaining a clear vision for future growth, aligning closely with Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, which emphasizes collaborative learning environments as pivotal for development. Innovative leadership, encompassing vision and strategy alongside risk management, is foundational. Leaders must embody a forward-thinking perspective and strategic approach to create an innovative learning environment conducive to PLCs, effectively handling risks and uncertainties to ensure continuous growth (Jafar et al., 2022). This also aligns with the Social Constructivist theory by Vygotsky, emphasizing the importance of collaborative knowledge construction and a communal learning environment.

Leader characteristics, including effective communication and active participation, are pivotal. Effective communication ensures clarity and alignment with PLC goals, while leaders' active involvement sets a role model for continuous learning within the PLC (Xiao et al., 2019). These aspects resonate with the Communities of Practice framework, where shared practices and collective learning are central. The characteristics of leaders, particularly in the realms of effective communication and active participation, play a vital role. The ability of leaders to articulate the mission, vision, and goals of PLCs with clarity and precision ensures that all members are aligned and motivated. This reflects the Communities of Practice theory, which values shared learning and joint enterprise as foundational elements of community engagement.

Shared leadership and decision-making, fostering a collaborative environment, and empowering ownership among educators are critical. This supports El Bakkali (2020). The study found that the leadership change design through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is effective when there is alignment of values between school principals and teachers, particularly after creating an open environment. This alignment of values needs to be embedded as part of the school's identity with the school principal acting as a change leader to ensure

sustainability. Shared leadership and decision-making further underscore the collaborative ethos of PLCs, promoting a culture where leadership responsibilities are distributed among all members. This approach resonates with distributed leadership theories, emphasizing that leadership efficacy in PLCs stems from a collective effort rather than hierarchical command.

The structural features of PLCs, such as shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, and the sharing of personal practice, are indispensable for their success. These features create a robust environment for sustained teacher development and improved educational outcomes, as demonstrated in the studies by Khanthap (2022) and Hamzah & Jamil (2019). Effective communication and interaction within the school environment are also important for successful PLCs. The document references studies by Khanthap (2022) and Hamzah & Jamil (2019), noting that clear and effective communication builds trust and clarity, essential for successful collaboration. Effective listening also plays a vital role, improving the ability of leaders to respond adaptively to educational challenges and feedback from teachers, which is crucial for the continuous improvement of PLCs.

In summary, the successful leadership of PLCs intertwines with the theoretical underpinnings of Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice. It demands a holistic approach encompassing innovative leadership, effective communication, shared leadership, and addressing practical challenges, all aimed at fostering a collaborative, learning-focused environment that emphasizes collective growth and student achievement.

Leadership Style of School Leadership in Fostering PLCs

The theoretical foundation of PLCs is deeply rooted in social constructivist theory, advocating that learning is fundamentally a social process that involves the collaborative construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory aligns with the principles of transformational and distributed leadership styles, which emphasize collaboration, shared vision, and collective inquiry, reinforcing the synergy between effective leadership and the foundational principles of PLCs.

Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiring and motivating educators to exceed their own interests for the group's benefit, is highlighted as particularly effective in promoting PLCs (Bass, 1985). This leadership style fosters a culture of professional growth, shared responsibility, and respect, essential for the collaborative and continuous learning environment that PLCs embody. Transformational leadership is closely aligned with the theme of innovative leadership, particularly in the areas of vision and strategy, as well as risk management. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate educators to work towards a shared vision, fostering an innovative learning environment crucial for PLC success. They also excel in managing risks and navigating uncertainties, ensuring the continuous growth of PLCs, a key aspect highlighted in the theme of risk management.

Distributed leadership, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of collaboration, cooperation, and authority sharing within schools. Principals practicing distributed leadership empower teachers and engage various stakeholders in decision-making processes, fostering a collaborative and innovative school climate (Çoban, et. al., 2020). This approach facilitates a collaborative leadership culture, essential for the success of PLCs by

involving multiple contributors in leadership functions, thereby enhancing the collective capacity for sustained PLC engagement and growth. Distributed leadership directly correlates with the theme of shared leadership and decision-making. This leadership style creates a collaborative environment by distributing roles and responsibilities among various members based on their expertise, encouraging teacher involvement in decision-making. It also promotes empowerment and ownership among educators, essential for sustaining PLC engagement and success.

Facilitative leadership, the leader's role is to foster open communication, problem-solving, and collective decision-making. Nordick, et. al. (2019), aligns with the PLC model by promoting inclusive participation and collaborative decision-making. This leadership style supports the PLC's ethos of shared knowledge, mutual support, and a commitment to ongoing improvement. Facilitative leadership embodies the sub-theme of effective communication by creating an environment where all members feel empowered to contribute their ideas, ensuring clarity and alignment with PLC goals. Furthermore, the active participation of leaders in PLC activities, characteristic of facilitative leadership, serves as a model for continuous learning and strong PLC culture, enhancing the community's effectiveness. Democratic leadership supports the sub-themes of shared values and vision, and supportive conditions. By involving educators in decision-making processes, democratic leadership fosters a collective focus on student learning and achievement, aligning with the PLC's shared values and vision. This approach also ensures the presence of supportive conditions that encourage collaborative work and professional growth, crucial for effective PLCs.

Situational leadership, which highlighted the ability of leaders to transform their approach to address the immediate needs of their educational institutions effectively, suggesting that situational leadership during crises involves a dynamic and flexible response to unprecedented conditions (Francisco, et.al., 2020), could offer a flexible approach to leading PLCs. This style acknowledges the dynamic nature of educational settings and the diverse needs of professional learning communities. Situational leadership is adept at addressing the themes of challenges and solutions, specifically in managing time constraints and enhancing participation. By adapting leadership styles based on the context and needs of the educators, situational leaders can identify strategies to effectively manage time and develop approaches to increase teacher participation and engagement in PLCs.

Autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles, though traditional, offer contrasting approaches to the more collaborative and participatory styles mentioned above. While autocratic leadership may hinder the collaborative essence of PLCs, democratic leadership could support it by involving educators in decision-making processes. Laissez-faire leadership, with its hands-off approach, might not provide the necessary guidance and support for PLCs to thrive.

Transactional leadership focuses on role and task clarity and contingent rewards (Burns, 1978). While this could ensure goal alignment and efficiency within PLCs, it may not fully capture the transformative and collaborative spirit that underpins the most successful PLCs. The study highlights the need for leaders to adopt styles that foster an environment conducive to the principles of PLCs—collaboration, shared vision, and professional growth. Transformational, distributed, and facilitative leadership styles are particularly noted for their

effectiveness in promoting these attributes within schools, suggesting that a blend of these styles, tailored to the specific context of the educational setting, may offer the best support for the development and sustainability of PLCs.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The pivotal role of school leadership in nurturing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is underscored by some key success factors. These include the establishment of a visionary leadership approach that not only sets the direction but also inspires and mobilizes educators towards shared objectives. A profound commitment to shared values underpins this, fostering a culture of trust, mutual respect, and collective responsibility. Effective communication is essential, ensuring that all members feel heard and valued, which in turn promotes a collaborative ethos. Decision-making processes that are inclusive and collaborative further empower educators, encouraging innovation and shared ownership of outcomes. Strategic problem-solving mechanisms enable the community to address challenges proactively, ensuring the PLC's adaptability and sustainability. Together, these elements create a fertile environment for professional growth, enhancing teaching practices and leading to improved student learning outcomes.

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