

LCCB as a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the Eyes of the Faculty

RANDDIE P. CUELO

La Consolacion College Bacolod

Abstract - This study aimed to assess, through the perceptions of its faculty, the practices of La Consolacion College Bacolod (LCCB) relating to professional learning communities (PLC). Ninety-two faculty responded to the 52-item standardized instrument "Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised" developed by Dr. Diane Olivier of the University of Louisiana measured perceptions towards the practice of the six dimensions of PLC. Results revealed that teachers positively perceive and agree that LCCB is a professional learning community by virtue of the evident practices of the PLC dimensions. Of the six dimensions, 'collective learning and application' ranked first, while 'shared and supportive leadership' was ranked the lowest. The perceptions of the teachers significantly vary, indicating that teaching classification, teaching experience, and affiliation in the program has an influence on how a teacher recognizes various institutional practices. The more those teachers are involved in practices of the College, the more likely they are to impress positive perception. The study concluded that LCCB is a legitimate professional

learning community from the eyes of its teachers and affirmed the finding of a previous related study that a shared and supportive leadership continues to be a need and demand by the faculty of the College.

Keywords - PLC, leadership, administration, organization

INTRODUCTION

“Teachers are the first learners.”

Lucianne Carmichael

Successful schools share a number of attributes: good leadership, a common vision that makes a climate of learning the highest priority, and teachers who use best practices, effective accountability system, and parent involvement (Haberman 2004). It is said however that one of the most promising strategies for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities (Dufour, Rebecca, & Eaker 2008).

The idea of improving schools by developing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is currently in vogue. Research has shown the benefits of schools becoming PLCs, including those noted by Newman (1991) and Hord (1997) [SEDL, 2000]. People use the term PLC to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education such as a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school organization, a national professional organization, and so on.

From his exposure in the United States in 2010 through a fellowship grant, the researcher observed that a PLC is an extended learning opportunity which fosters collaborative learning among teachers within a particular work environment. He learned that it is used in school organizations as a way to organize teachers into working groups.

In one definition, a PLC is a school in which the professionals (administrators and teachers) continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they

learn (SEDL, 2000). On the other hand, Hord (1997) states that PLCs “extend classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students, teachers, and administrators simultaneously in learning.”

Moreover, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005) defines a PLC as “a shared vision or running a school in which everyone can make a contribution, and staff is encouraged to collectively undertake activities and reflection in order to constantly improve their students’ performance.” The concept of ‘community’ is being presented as a crucial element to the success of PLCs where the process should be reflective and where both individual and community growth is achieved. Along this line, Senge (2005) believes that it is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization and further suggests that when teams learn together there are beneficial results for the organization.

Gajda (2005) concurs that a major principle of PLCs is that people learn more together than if they were on their own. The idea of team learning is an interesting concept that teachers work to promote in their classrooms but often do not practice in their professional lives. Edgeron & Kritsonis (2006) assert, “programs and systems are not the measure of success, but success is measured through committed and dedicated individuals within systems, engaged in healthy and systematic collaboration as a result of established relationships.

Fullan (2005) reveals that numerous studies document the fact that professional learning communities or collaborative work cultures at the school and ideally at the district level are critical for the implementation of attempted reforms. Truly, if schools are to be significantly more effective, they must break from the traditional remote model upon which they were created and embrace a new model that enables them to function as learning communities (Dufour and Eaker 1998). Instead of ‘organization’ the term ‘community’ places greater emphasis on relationships, shared ideals, and a strong culture – all factors that are critical to school improvement. The challenge therefore for educators is to create a community of commitment – a professional learning community.

At La Consolacion College Bacolod, 'community' is one of the core values which takes several connotations but refers to the idea of 'being one' and of 'collaboration'. Apart from that, however, the College employs various activities, policies and programs that resemble attributes of an organization operating as a professional learning community. These include regular meetings of faculty members, supervisory visits, classroom observations with feedback mechanisms, departmental celebrations, assessment practices, and a lot more. What is missing from these practices, however, is the answer to this question: Are our professionals (administrators and teachers) consciously aware that these practices, when sustained and taken earnestly, can lead to success for the school?

This critical question prompted the researcher to assess the perception of the school's professionals (administrators and teachers) about the different practices employed in the organization that may label La Consolacion College Bacolod as a Professional Learning Community (PLC).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study primarily aimed to assess and analyze, through the perceptions of its teaching personnel, the practices of La Consolacion College Bacolod relating to professional learning community (PLC).

FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Richard Dufour's concept of Professional Learning Community defined as a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve, and which operates under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

In education circles, the term *learning community* has become a commonplace. It is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning

tasks for students, or engaging students, teachers, and administrators simultaneously in learning - to suggest just a few.

The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning has profound implications for schools.

Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture. In PLCs, working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school. Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress.

The literature on professional learning communities gives attention to five dimensions of such organizational arrangements: (1) shared and supportive leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) collective learning and application or creativity, (4) shared personal practices, and (5) supportive conditions which relates to other two sub-dimensions, namely (5a) relationships and (5b) structures.

Literatures are clear about what successful professional learning communities look like and act like. The requirements necessary for such organizational arrangements include: (1) the collegial and facilitative participation of the leader, who shares leadership - and thus, power and authority - through inviting staff input in decision making, (2) a shared vision that is developed from staff's unwavering commitment to students' learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work, (3) collective learning among staff and application of that learning to solutions that address students' needs, (4) the visitation and review of each teacher's classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement, and (5a) physical conditions and (5b) human capacities that support such an operation.

Sparks (2005) said that well-implemented professional learning communities are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching

and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers. The framework of a professional learning community is inextricable linked to the effective integration of standards, assessment, and accountability with the leaders balancing the desire for professional autonomy with the fundamental principles and values that drive collaboration and mutual accountability (Reeves, 2005).

In this study, the teaching personnel of LCC Bacolod, who are classified either as administrator or faculty member, will assess, through their perceptions, the evidence or practice of these attributes and dimensions. Through their general perception, the College will be provided with relevant information whether or not, being a teaching educational institution, it is a professional learning community. Eventually, keeping in mind the overall findings of the study, programs that will formally legitimize or sustain LCCB as Professional Learning Community will be developed. It is hoped that the information this study will provide offers reference and basis to the College as to how it can re-integrate the principles of a progressive educational institution.

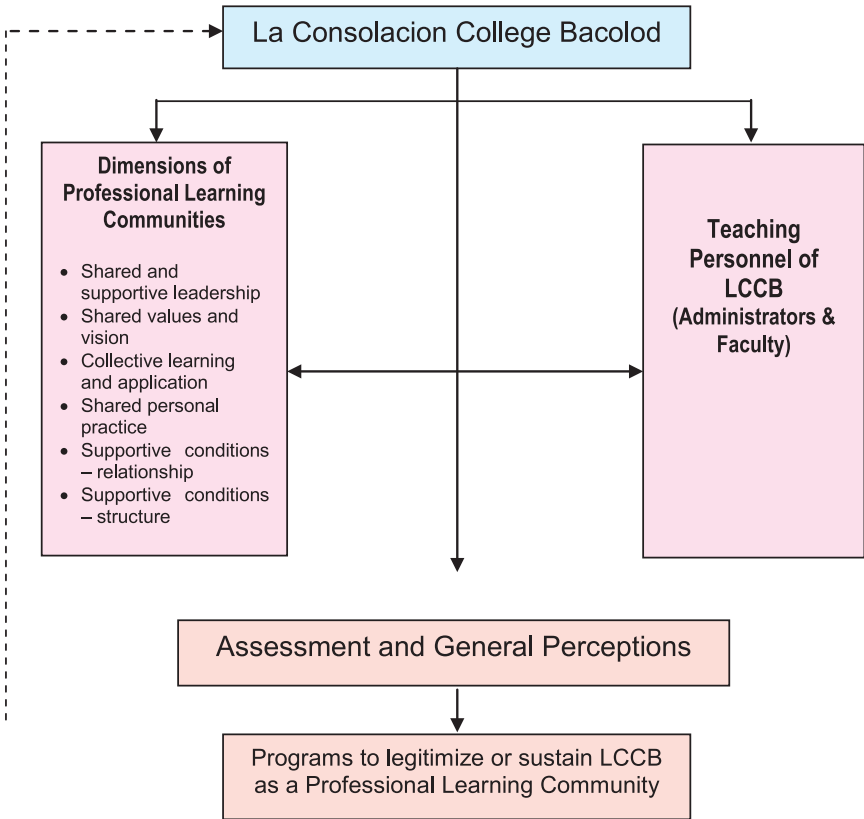


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Framework

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The descriptive type of research was employed due to the nature of the research being undertaken where there is a need to assess the perception of the teachers and administrators about the critical attributes and dimensions practiced by the College operating as a professional learning community.

Research Locale

The study took place in La Consolacion College-Bacolod (LCCB) which is a member of the Association of Schools of the Augustinian Sisters (ASAS) operated by the Augustinian Sisters of our Lady of Consolacion (ASOLC) congregation.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were the fulltime teaching personnel -- administrators and faculty members -- of LCCB who were teaching for the academic year 2010-2011.

Profile of the Full-Time Teaching Personnel of LCCB Grouped according to Teaching Classification and Length of Service

The teaching personnel of the school were the respondents of the study who were grouped either as administrator or faculty member in any of the five departments namely, Integrated School, School of Architecture, Fine Arts and Interior Design (SARFAID), School of Business and Information Technology (SBIT), School of Hospitality and Tourism Management (SHTM) and School of Liberal Arts and Education (SLAE).

Of the 112 enlisted fulltime teaching personnel for the AY 2010-2011, 92 teachers responded to the survey. Almost 40% (39) of the total respondents were from the Integrated School considering the big population of teachers teaching in the department. Teachers from the SLAE were the least number of respondents in the survey.

In terms of the number of years they have taught, 24 teachers (26%) reported they have been in the service for at least 16 years, while almost 24% of the fulltime teaching personnel, administrator or faculty member, has taught either between one and five years or between six and ten years.

Fourteen teachers or 15% of the total respondents were administrators who were composed of department heads, program heads, team leaders, coordinators or unit heads.

Data-gathering Instrument

This study utilized a standardized survey instrument called Professional Learning Community Assessment- Revised (PLCA-R) developed through collaboration by Dr. Dianne F. Olivier from the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The instrument utilizes a four-point, forced Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree. The tool was developed in 2003 and since then has been used by teachers and principals to assess their organizations. (*See Appendix*)

Data-gathering Procedure

The instrument was distributed to the fulltime teachers of the College in April 2011 with the assistance of the five department secretaries. Responses of the respondents were encoded, analyzed and interpreted with the technical assistance of the Research and Accreditation Office (RAO).

Statistical Treatment

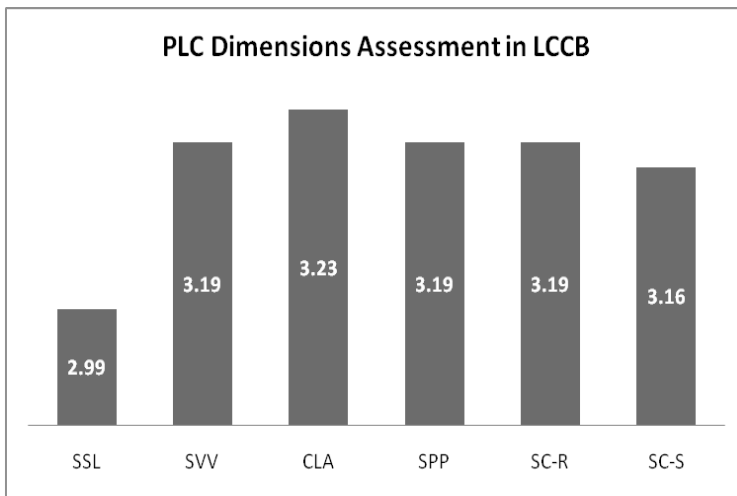
Mean (for problem 1), rank (problem 2), and one-way analysis of variance (problem 3) were utilized to statistically tabulate the data gathered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The fulltime teaching personnel of the school, composed of administrators and faculty members, has a positive and agreeable general perception about the practices of LCCB operating as a Professional Learning Community (PLC). They agree that all critical attributes that constitute the six general dimensions that characterize an organization as a professional learning community are seen, felt, observed and practiced by the College.

Keeping in mind, however, the almost identical yet relative perceptions given for the different critical attributes of a PLC

contextualized in LCC Bacolod, some areas needed attention from the stakeholders of the school. These include (1) the inclusion of staff members in the creation of expectations that serve to increase student achievement, (2) the consistent involvement of staff members in discussing and making decisions about most school issues, (3) the provision of various opportunities and structure for collective learning through open dialogue, (4) the promotion of a culture of trust and respect, (5) the promotion of communication systems across the entire school community, and (6) the provision of opportunities for faculty to observe peers and offer encouragement.



The top ranked PLC dimension operating in LCCB as perceived by the teaching personnel is 'Collective Learning and Application' (CLA). Attributes of this dimension include the staff and teachers' tendency to work together to address various concerns and solve problems (especially students' needs), collegial relationships among faculty, professional development, and collaboration among teachers to improve teaching and learning.

The lowest ranked PLC practices are under the dimension of 'Shared and Supportive Leadership' (SSL) where less positive perceptions are observed when (1) staff members are not consistently involved in making decisions, (2) administrators do not incorporate advice from

faculty to make decisions, (3) faculty and stakeholders may not have accessibility to key information, (4) administrators are not proactive and not responsive to address areas where support is needed, (5) when opportunities may not be provided for faculty to initiate change, (6) administrators do not share responsibility and rewards for innovative actions, (7) administrators fail to participate with faculty in sharing power and authority, (8) leadership is not promoted and nurtured among faculty members, or when (9) decision-making takes place at a limited level in the community.

Across all dimensions of professional learning community in the context of the school organization of LCC Bacolod, there is a significant difference in the perceptions of the teaching personnel when they are grouped according to their teaching classification, that is, (1) Administrators, (2) Integrated School, (3) SARFAID, (4) SBIT, (5) SHTM, (6) SLAE. There are varying perceptions as to how attributes of a professional learning community are practiced and observed in the College.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study generated the following conclusion:

1. From the perceptions of its teaching force, La Consolacion College Bacolod is a professional learning community (PLC) by virtue of the practices of the various critical attributes that constitute the different dimensions that legitimize an organization like a school operating as a professional learning community.

2. Collaboration can be seen, felt, and observed among faculty members in times when problems need to be solved and when issues and concerns relating to teaching and learning need to be addressed.

3. A leadership that is shared and supportive continues to be a need and a demand among stakeholders, especially members, of a school organization like LCC Bacolod which unconsciously operates as a PLC.

4. Perceptions of teachers about how a school operates vary and depend on their affiliations (per department) or length of service in the profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the foregoing findings and conclusions, the following recommendations addressing the highlights of the study are advanced by the researcher:

1. A unified institutional program on professional learning community which identifies concrete action plans be drafted. Specific plans may be geared towards the promotion of a culture of collaboration and collective inquiry among teachers such as dialogue, peer mentoring, or sharing of best personal teaching practices.

2. Addressing the lowest rated critical attributes under each PLC dimension, it is recommended that:

a. The offices of the VPAA and department heads/deans that are the starting point of most academic policies that serve to increase student achievement involve and include faculty members and staff in the creation and setting of expectations and policies.

b. Top administration (President, VPPAS, VPAA, VPFA) consistently involve staff members in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.

c. Department heads that have direct supervision of the teachers consistently provide opportunities and structure for collective learning through open dialogue.

d. The Offices of the VPPAS and VPAA aggressively develop a functional and concrete program which promotes a culture of trust and respect among teachers.

e. The school, through the top administration, establishes a mechanism which promotes an effective system of communication across the entire school organization, including parents and partner communities.

f. Department heads develop a concrete program or enhance an existing one which provides opportunities for faculty to observe peers and offer encouragement.

3. A formal institutional launch of a new tag for LCCB be done during the personnel's institutional assembly and for the new tag to be included in the promotional and marketing materials produced

by the External Affairs Office: **“LCCB: A Community of Friends; A Community of Professional Learners.”** There is prestige in the name as most school organizations in the United States are starting to be identified as such. This assessment study legitimizes LCCB as an operating Professional Learning Community.

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