

Developing the Culture of Collective Learning Among Malaysian Teachers

Abstract

Dynamic changes in education urge teachers to learn continuously to improve their knowledge via formal or informal means. This paper discusses teachers' collective learning practices in order to build a culture of collective learning among teachers. Questionnaires were distributed to 321 teachers in 14 High Performing Schools (HPS) throughout Malaysia. The results indicated that HPS possessed collective learning culture when all the collective learning activities were practiced at a high level by the teachers.

Keywords: *collective learning, teacher learning, organizational learning, learning culture.*

Introduction

Collective learning refers to team learning that involves the culture of teamwork within an organization. The culture includes important values such as mutual respect, trust and mutual support to build team commitment and professionalism. A culture of collective learning relies on integrated learning among the members of the organization. Teachers constantly add knowledge through self-learning and then share their knowledge with colleagues. This effort helps teachers to enhance the knowledge and improve their efficacy and effectiveness in performing their routine tasks.

A study by Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002) found that high quality teachers practiced collective learning. The quality is measured in terms of the teacher's

ability to show commitment in their work to achieve the vision and mission of the school. According to Hord (2009), the most significant factor to determine whether students can learn effectively or not is the quality of teaching. She believes that the teaching quality can be improved through collective learning. Lambert (2003) stressed that it was very important for teachers to understand the relationship between learning along with the students with learning in a team. Learning together with fellow students is analyzing data to identify students' learning problems. Priority is given to students' learning needs. Meanwhile, teachers need to take responsibility for acquiring more knowledge, strategies and approaches to improve the effectiveness of their teaching. This task should be seen by teachers as part of their official duties. Through team learning, teachers analyze the current situation, the result of applying the existing knowledge of individual and team learning, develop strategies and take appropriate action in achieving their goals in learning and developing their professionalism.

Collective Learning Activities among Teachers

A study by Retna and Ng (2006) suggested that school must emphasize the ability of its teachers to see the importance of collective learning. The study was conducted with the use of ethnographic methods involving face to face interviews, observations of meetings and informal conversations with students and parents aimed at leveraging the idea of "*Thinking School Learning Nation (TSLN)*," which is the vision of the Singapore Ministry of Education. Some of the practices that cultivate collective learning is learning collectively, engaging in dialogue and building trust between each other. Zuraidah Abdullah (2009) detailed the practice of collective learning as the sharing of information, planning and solving multiple problems and improving teachers' and students' learning opportunities as well as applying new skills, new teaching strategies and new practices in daily work. Learning synergies can only be built through team learning. Therefore, teachers need to build a positive perception of their team. Dahlgren and Chiriac (2009) carried out a study on the concept of responsibility for learning and teamwork. The study was conducted in Sweden using semi-structured interviews involving 20 teachers. Their findings show the teachers admit that their job requires working in teams. In addition, the study also found that teamwork can be incentivized and facilitate team learning. The understanding of the teamwork orientation affects teachers' collective learning ability. A study carried out by Gregory (2010) to examine how teachers solve problems as a team showed that teacher learning

outcomes differed due to positive or negative perception of the teacher by their team members.

Opportunities to learn in a team are important factors improving teacher professionalism. A study conducted by Armour and Makapoulu (2012) found that teachers who are encouraged to work collectively are more effective. The data were collected in structured interviews with six elementary school teachers, six teachers, four physical education teachers, two special education teachers and two teaching assistants. Their findings indicate that interactive learning opportunities and collective engagement are positive factors that enhance teachers' professionalism. Therefore, building a strong learning team is a must in developing a culture of collective learning. Steinhilber (2008) lists three features necessary to build a strong team: co-ordination, communication and camaraderie. Coordination is the ability to coordinate goals, ways of working, roles and responsibilities of each team member. Honesty and openness in sharing information allows for effective communication within the team. Hence, mutual trust among team members builds camaraderie. Heimeriks (2008) pointed out that team members must be satisfied with working as a team to build a sense of trust. Further, a study by Lucas (2010) also related the role of the team to the culture of learning. He found that the culture of team learning in teamwork has a positive impact on the process of knowledge transfer within the organization. Continuous knowledge transfer will ensure sustainable learning in organizations. A study on factors affecting sustainability in organizational learning was carried out by Prugsamatz (2010). His finding showed that individual motivation for learning and group dynamics have a significant influence on the sustainability of learning within the organization. Learning sustainability enables schools to develop the culture of collective learning.

Objectives and methodology

This study aims to identify activities that are linked to the collective learning among teachers in the Malaysian High Performance Schools. Data were collected with the use of questionnaires. Items in the questionnaires were developed with the help of fifteen experts in education. The section covers five elements of teachers' collective learning such as a) elements of dialogue and discussion, b) elements of knowledge sharing, c) elements of reflecting and acting as a team, d) elements of monitoring the learning of team members, and e) elements of excellent teamwork. A five-point Likert-type scale was used for measurement: 1 = Not at all, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Always and, 5 = Very Often. A pilot study of 30 school teach-

ers showed that *Cronbach's Alpha* reliability index for each item was in the range proposed by Chua (2006), i.e., from .902 to .945.

The questionnaires were distributed to 321 teachers in 14 selected High Performance Schools (HPS) throughout Malaysia. High Performance School is a recognition by the Malaysian Ministry of Education for schools that have achieved the highest level based on the standard determined by the Inspectorate and Quality Assurance. The schools have been able to devise a variety of programs to maintain and boost performance while guiding other schools to improve their performance. Among them is a program of training and professional development of teachers and school leaders, giving autonomy to schools to implement the curriculum and flexible personnel management, school performance-based compensation provision and implementation guidance to neighbouring schools.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 20.0 to assess mean and standard deviation of the stated variable characteristics. The use of the means is a method widely used to describe the responses of all survey participants to the items in an instrument (Creswell, 2008). For the purpose of describing the level of collective learning practices among the teachers in the HPS, this study modified the mean value interpretation. The level of practice interpreted by the mean value is interpreted as low when the mean score is between 1.00 and 2.33, moderate when the mean score is between 2.34 and 3.67, and high when the mean score is between 3.68 and 5.00.

Findings and discussion

Table 1 shows all the elements of collective learning for dialogue and discussion practiced at a high level in the High Performing Schools (mean range between 4.06 and 4.31). All the elements of knowledge sharing were also practiced at a high level in the High Performing Schools (mean range between 4.11 and 4.26). Furthermore, all the elements of making reflection and taking action as a team were practiced at a high level in the High Performing Schools (mean range between 4.26 and 4.42). As shown in the Table, all of the elements of monitoring and developing the team members were practiced at a high level of implementation in the High Performing Schools (mean range between 4.20 and 4.50). Finally, the Table also shows that all the elements for outstanding teamwork were practiced at a high level in the Malaysian High Performing Schools HPS (mean range between 4.26 and 4.65).

Table 1

ELEMENTS OF PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION	Std. Dev.	Mean score	Level of practice
Informal conversations become part of the learning resources for teachers	0.66	4.31	High
Conversations among teachers focused on their professional development	0.71	4.19	High
Teachers debate their opinion professionally	0.68	4.21	High
Meeting conducted like a professional dialogue	0.87	4.07	High
Ongoing professional dialogue occurred among teachers	0.79	4.15	High
Teacher expresses their views and ideas openly	0.83	4.06	High
ELEMENTS OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING			
Teacher implements in-house training	0.78	4.25	High
Teacher shares their expert knowledge	0.81	4.26	High
Teacher shares reading materials with friends	0.81	4.16	High
Teaching aids shared with team members and other teachers	0.71	4.35	High
Action research outcomes are presented for the benefit of teachers / school staff	0.89	4.11	High
New methods of teaching and learning shared with colleagues	0.74	4.25	High
Teacher collaborates with teachers outside of school in the case of dissemination of knowledge	0.74	4.23	High
ELEMENTS OF REFLECTING AND TAKING ACTION IN TEAM			
Committee meeting served as a platform to reflect and solve teachers' teaching and learning problems	0.68	4.38	High
Teacher meetings leveraged to make important decisions regarding school agenda	0.71	4.36	High
Action research performed to improve the teaching and learning process	0.76	4.26	High
Data and information used for decision-making	0.69	4.31	High
Knowledge sharing outcomes documented for future reference	0.72	4.30	High
Continuous benchmarking activities undertaken in accordance with the school's needs	0.72	4.42	High
ELEMENTS OF MONITORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEAM MEMBERS			
Head of Department of Department ensures that all members engage in learning activities	0.69	4.41	High
Feedback from observational activities discussed thoroughly	0.81	4.20	High
Teacher shows accountability to colleagues	0.69	4.33	High
Teacher trusts their colleagues	0.64	4.45	High
Mentoring and coaching activities become the school culture	0.70	4.32	High
Teacher's learning assisted by the Buddy System	0.80	4.21	High

ELEMENTS OF EXCELLENT TEAMWORK			
Teacher willing to work with every team member	0.61	4.51	High
Teacher recognizes the knowledge and skills of their team members	0.60	4.48	High
Teacher understands that teamwork is important to achieve the vision and mission of the school	0.59	4.48	High
Teacher produces modules / teaching aids in teams	0.77	4.26	High
Teacher feels satisfied working in teams	0.65	4.65	High

The findings of this study indicated that all collective learning elements were practiced very often by the teachers in the High Performing Schools. These findings match with the findings of Zuraidah Abdullah (2009), which showed that Fully Residential Schools achieved the highest mean score for the practice of collective learning and application. This means excellent schools provided teachers with the learning environment which became the encouraging factors for teachers to enhance their learning. Teachers constantly strive to improve their potential as effective teachers. Professional dialogues became means for teachers to identify the most effective strategies and approaches to achieve the aims of the school. Learning outcomes applied to everyday tasks improve the quality of teachers' work. Many improvements were made to the teaching and learning activities performed as a result of continuous and intensive team reflection. Activities and other school programs are also carried out with a strong commitment to achieve the goals and vision of the school. Collective learning refers to team learning that involves the culture of teamwork within the organization. The culture of collective learning, including important values such as respect, trust and mutual support, helps in the development of an excellent team. Integrated learning relies on teachers' commitment and professionalism within their team. Good teamwork helps teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills and improve their efficacy and effectiveness in performing their routine tasks.

Summary and recommendations

Teachers in the Malaysian High Performing Schools have developed the culture of collective learning by practicing all the elements of professional dialogue and discussion, sharing knowledge, reflecting and taking action in a team, monitoring and developing team members in learning and practicing excellent teamwork. Collective learning creates a lot of opportunities for teachers to share information, plan and solve problems as a team. Teachers in their team also have the opportu-

nity to improve through dialogue and discussion and apply new skills, strategies and practices in their daily tasks. The continuous application of new knowledge leads to the improvement of the overall quality of teaching in the schools. Quality improvement has a significant and meaningful impact on students' learning and their performance in school.

Teachers have been burdened with workload at school. In addition to the teaching and learning processes in the classroom, dealing with students outside of the schooling time is common to all teachers. The implications of this study suggest that collective learning should be practiced to solve some of the many problems faced by teachers. Collective learning culture allows teachers to motivate each other mutually in terms of learning through everyday tasks. The culture encourages team members to support each other, as well as facilitates them in performing their daily tasks. Collective learning culture provides a learning environment for teachers to work harmoniously in a team, help each other and care for their team members. Difficult tasks can be performed more easily with strong emotional support in a strong team. Mutual problem-solving, sharing of knowledge and experience and mutual respect are indicators of excellent teamwork. Such culture is not easy to develop but essential for a successful school.

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