

**Appraising ‘professional learning communities’ (PLCs) for Malaysian schools through the lens of sociocultural theory: A critical review of literature with implications for research and practice**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article, I scrutinise the theory and practice of professional learning communities (PLCs), focussing on their implementation for the Malaysian context, seen mainly through the lens of sociocultural theory. PLCs in Malaysia are a relatively new development over the past decade and have been affirmed as a key strategy under the Ministry of Education’s ‘New Narrative of Educational Practice’ in 2019. Here, I consider both theoretical and empirical literature to argue that, in theory as well as practice, PLCs can be a sustainable and viable model for professional learning; however, important caveats apply. The arguments put forward here are primarily from the perspective of sociocultural learning theory, which draws attention to (1) dialogue as the primary mechanism for learning in PLCs and (2) sociocultural context as influential for enabling or constraining said mechanism. Building on these, I review some of the specifics of the Malaysian context, drawing possible connections to practice and positioning them as ‘foreshadowed problems’ (Malinowski, 1922). The paper concludes by issuing a call to action for practitioners and researchers, inviting further work to clarify and better understand PLCs in Malaysia and internationally.

**KEYWORDS:** Professional learning communities, teachers, dialogue, sociocultural theory, Malaysia

## Introduction

PLCs are variously defined in the literature, but in this paper, I adopt the definition that they are 'teams intentionally organised through formal structures to facilitate teacher inquiry into classroom practices' (Van Lare & Brazer, 2013, p. 375). This definition stipulates who is involved (teams of teachers), how they work together (structured/formalised meetings for collective inquiry) and the object of PLC activity (classroom practice i.e. matters related to student learning).

As opposed to informal learning opportunities and spontaneous staffroom discussions, I take PLCs as scheduled sessions for groups of teachers to deal with issues of student learning, share ideas or interrogate each other's practice. PLCs have sometimes been used as a shorthand for referring to a broader culture (*budaya*) of collaboration and sharing in schools, also as a kind of statement of aspiration (Zuraidah Abdullah, 2017). The concept has also been used in the sense of a network of schools working together, or 'digital' PLCs where teachers share practice via social media and other platforms. These concepts of PLCs have their merits and perhaps share the same ethos or spirit, but I argue that they are distinct social arrangements which have to be examined on their own merits, not unceremoniously conflated. My primary focus, in this paper at least, is on teachers' collaborative practice within schools, with some level of formalisation, structure and intentionality—and as we shall see in the Malaysian context, institutional approval. This definition, by no means an atypical approach, provides some necessary focus for the phenomena under investigation, as I review the research literature and offer contributions from sociocultural theory.

The Malaysian policy story of PLCs began circa 2011, when it was identified by the Teacher Education Division as a key initiative for teacher professional development—at the time, primarily with a focus on Lesson Study (Lim, Kor & Chia, 2016). This was followed by the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-25 (MEB) endorsement of PLCs with the aim of 'raising teacher professionalism and instilling life-long learning', as part of wider reforms to transform teaching into a 'profession of choice'. To specify PLC operations, twenty collaborative activities or strategies were identified, including Lesson Study, Teacher Sharing Sessions, Book Clubs and Learning Walks (Teacher Education Division, 2011). More recently with the advent of the 'New Narrative in Educational Practice' (*Naratif Baharu Amalan Pendidikan*) by the Director-General of Education Malaysia in 2019 – PLCs remain part of the national strategy of professional support to raise capacity among teachers (Amin Senin, 2019), at least at the time of this article's writing.

The rise of PLCs is arguably yet another example of educational isomorphism, resulting from transfer and homogenisation in an increasingly globalised policy landscape. Since its popularisation via Hord's (1997) seminal work, PLCs have become a feature of educational policy in many nations, states and school districts (Stoll & Louis, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998), spreading beyond the Anglo-American heartlands of their birth and in some cases hybridizing with pre-existing collaborative practices in new contexts, such as Lesson Study in Japan (Yoshida, 1999), *jiayanzu* ('teach research groups') in China (Paine & Ma, 1993), or Singaporean Teacher Network's Learning Circles (LC) (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012). PLCs have been introduced in contexts where formalised teacher collaboration is comparatively less well-established, like Malaysia (Abdullah & Ghani, 2014; Ling, 2017; Ismail, Ghani & Abdullah, 2014). Even so, in policy, as with all other spheres of social endeavour, context is key. As such, the focus of the article is primarily on the application of PLCs to the Malaysian

context—however, given that the PLC concept has such transnational mobility, it is necessary to first sketch the wider field of international research.

## Literature Review

### PLCs as a model for sustainable professional learning – reviewing the evidence

Having offered a definitional scope, context and rationale for this paper, this section reviews the research evidence for PLCs that explain why it is considered a desirable intervention. This review connects PLCs with the idea of sustainability; and forms the base for the article's subsequent arguments.

The matter of sustainability, while not in the foreground of PLC literature, is inextricably built into PLC design and rationale. On the one hand, it is widely believed that the quality of an education system depends in large part to the quality of its teachers (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Borko, 2004) and on the other, there is a growing awareness that traditional, workshop-based continuing professional development (CPD) has critical limitations, such as that they are [1] decontextualized and episodic, when it should preferably be embedded in day-to-day teaching, closer to practice (Cordingley & Bell, 2012); [2] not reflective of teachers' needs and learning preferences (Christ et al., 2017; Pang & Wray, 2017); [3] often implemented in a top-down fashion, thus eroding teacher agency (Hardy, 2012; Philpott & Oates, 2017; Watson, 2014). In other words, there is the view that sustainable, future-facing education requires teachers to engage in in-service learning, and that workshops alone appear insufficient for the task. This in my view motivates the 'turn' from workshop-heavy models towards professional community.

In the literature, PLCs are a multi-dimensional construct of a theoretical ideal for professional community in schools, based on the five dimensions of shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning, shared teaching practice, and supportive structural and relational conditions (Hord, 1997). Sigurðardóttir (2010)'s review produced a similar list of PLC characteristics:

- Shared values and vision that focus on students' learning.
- High expectation of pupils' academic achievement.
- Shared leadership that values teachers' participation in making decisions.
- A perception of mutual support among staff.
- Collaborative learning among professional staff that addresses pupils' needs.
- Organizational arrangement that supports teachers' collaboration.
- Habits of work that encourage collaborative learning.
- Job satisfaction and commitment.

According to the literature, these elements and characteristics of PLCs provide a foundation for effective PD—one that incorporates interdependent and shared job-embedded collaborative practices. Attributed to Senge's (1990) theories of organisational learning and Wenger's (1998) theory of learning, or 'communities of practice', PLCs entail teachers acting in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-focused, growth-promoting way for their students' benefit (Toole & Louis, 2002; Bolam et al., 2005). The learning activities in PLCs are usually 'embedded into the daily work; teachers gain knowledge, try it out in practice, and, from the experience, gain yet more knowledge. They do this in interaction with each other, by working collaboratively' (Sigurðardóttir, 2010, p.397)—this forms a contrast

to decontextualized training that may not connect with teachers needs and may be less likely applied or deemed relevant to them.

Based on the above, PLCs appear to be a framework for professional learning that is in keeping with the times. Crucially, there appears to be a consensus that PLCs are linked to desirable outcomes. Vescio, Ross and Adam's (2008) review concluded that '[The] unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumptions that student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs... is a resounding and encouraging yes' (p. 87), a finding which has since found further support (Richmond & Manokore, 2011; Roth et al. 2011; Christ, Arya & Chiu, 2017). The optimism about the positive effect of PLCs on student outcomes is frequently cited in the literature, although there exist studies on PLCs that show more indifferent effects (Burde, 2016; Aylsworth, 2012), suggesting that the relationship may not be as straightforward as presumed.

Beyond student outcomes, PLCs are associated with other desirable school-based outcomes. Higher functioning PLCs are shown to predict higher levels of teacher collective efficacy (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017), which in turn predict increased teacher job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni & Steca, 2003), helping behaviours (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000) and team performance (Katz-Navon & Erez, 2005). Moreover, collaborative experiences fostered by PLCs are theorised to furnish more mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997) which in turn lead to increased self-efficacy among teachers (Weißenrieder, Roesken, Schuele & Blömeke, 2015; Mintzes, Marcum, Messerschmidt-Yates & Mark, 2013; Lee, Zhang & Yin, 2011). High teacher self-efficacy is in turn correlated with more teacher curriculum responsibility leading to instructional innovation (Guskey, 1988) and better motivated students (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). Self-efficacy proved to be a consistent predictor of varying human behaviour such as creativity (Tella & Ayeni, 2006) and job involvement (Yang, Kao & Huang, 2006).

### **Problematising PLCs in the Malaysian context**

Notwithstanding the support for PLCs in the literature, there are also studies which warn of potential, often interrelated pitfalls for those who seek to establish PLCs. Given limited space, here I offer two pitfalls that figure prominently in the literature.

The first pitfall has to do with the burden of work that falls on educators, who are at the centre of PLCs. To busy teachers carrying heavy workloads, it is unsurprising that some perceive PLCs as yet another unsustainable addition to duties (Lee & Kim, 2016). In the case of Singapore, Hairon, Goh & Lin (2014) and Hairon and Tan (2017) demonstrate that the introduction of PLC activities requires teachers to master a new nomenclature and set of practices (e.g. collaborative work, peer classroom observation, other administrative tasks) which can be arduous and time-consuming. This issue is likely to apply in Malaysia as well, where the latest available TALIS survey suggests that teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time working on administrative tasks and tasks unrelated to teaching and learning more than double the OECD average (OECD, 2014). It is acknowledged that at the time of writing, the Ministry of Education has announced measures to reduce teachers' clerical work; however, more recent empirical data on this is still unavailable. Besides teachers, workload issues affect school leaders as well. Hallinger's (2010) survey of scholars and educational leaders in Malaysia suggests a 'reform overload' experienced by educators, at the expense of their energy and motivation (p. 409).

The second pitfall is that PLCs risk being implemented through surface-level compliance, without reflecting a deeper understanding of its underlying theories and processes, as in the case of other education reforms (Hallinger, 2010). In the Malaysian context, this risk is acknowledged by Zuraidah Abdullah (2017), who goes to lengths in her work to improve practitioners' understanding of the PLC concept.

To illustrate the importance of theory, consider that PLCs are often attributed to Senge's (1990) organisational learning theories. Integral to organisational learning is 'double-loop learning' (Argyris & Schon, 1978) a rich concept that entails the capacity to question the value and philosophical assumptions behind one's goals, strategies and actions. For PLCs to have fidelity to these theoretical roots, teachers should have the space to engage in collective double-loop learning by being open to challenge and questioning assumptions behind their practice; however, some research has found teacher communities which, rather than allowing for these practices, are better characterised as 'performance training sects' (Hargreaves, 2003, p.186) whereby community becomes a tool to foster conformity and standardisation, thus diminishing the individual teachers' professional judgement and creativity. An example of this emerged in the ethnographic study by Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001), where group norms of politeness made it hard for them to acknowledge and interrogate differences, giving an illusion of sameness and sealing off potential areas of productive discussion (pp. 982-3).

Currently, whether and how these and other pitfalls operate in the Malaysian context are empirical questions which require empirical answers that we do not have at hand. The extant PLC literature in Malaysia mainly comprises small-to-medium scale descriptive and correlation-based statistical studies (Abdullah, 2009; 2016; Abdullah & Ghani, 2014; Ling, 2017; Ismail et al., 2014; Yaakob & Yunus, 2016), in some cases adding in semi-structured interviews to illustrate findings (Saad et al., 2017; Tiong, 2016). These studies contribute by breaking the ground for future research and illustrating the role of variables like school culture (Yaakob & Yunus, 2016), school leadership (Abdullah, 2017) and administrative workload (Khairul et al., 2017) in relation to PLCs, but, for methodological and theoretical reasons, do not answer the substantive, often socio-culturally (or socio-historically) situated questions raised in this paper.

We may conclude, therefore, that it is not enough to know that PLCs work 'in principle' but consider how the idealised features of PLCs align with the norms in the contexts in which they are embedded. Understanding this congruence between PLCs and their sociocultural contexts is especially pertinent when PLCs are adopted in new contexts, given that there is a gap in our understanding of how PLCs are differently enacted from one culture to another (Hairon et al. 2017). Moreover, I argue that achieving meaningful scrutiny of PLC practice requires a description not only of the *what* and *why* of PLCs, but also *how* PLCs bring about learning and change. The model of PLCs often present in the literature is a 'black box' model where PLC features are ascertained and linked to positive outcomes, but without enumerating *how* those changes happen.

I believe that both issues of 'context' and 'mechanism' can be illuminated through Vygotskian sociocultural theory (1978), which becomes the focus of the next section.

### **Dialogue: conceptualising the 'black box' of PLCs**

The often-overlooked clue to how PLCs support teacher learning is its association with Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). In sociocultural terms, dialogue, defined

as the practice of using language as a tool for people to think together ('interthinking', according to Mercer, 2000), is the mechanism for learning, the vehicle for joint reasoning and framework for productive collaboration (Vrikki, Warwick, Vermunt, Mercer & Van Halem, 2017). Elaborating on this relationship, Littleton and Mercer (2013) describe dialogue as an 'intermental activity' where thinking is weaved together between multiple participants, which in turn has a complementary relationship with the more conventionally understood 'intramental' concept of cognition. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

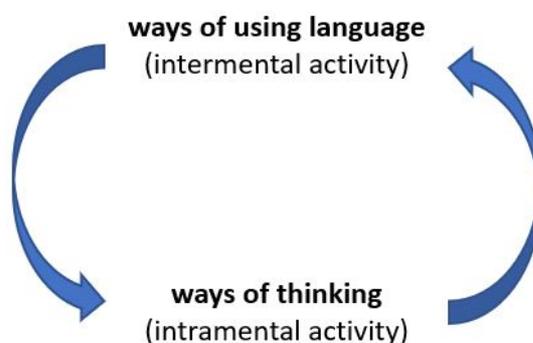


Figure 1 The relationship between intermental and intramental activities

Dialogue is acknowledged as a central process in collaborative teacher professional learning (Borko, 2004; Wells, 2014). Consequently, some studies have made progress illuminating the 'black box' of teacher learning by studying how teachers engage in dialogue, whether it is in tracing how teachers frame problems of practice over time (Bannister, 2015), parsing 'knowledge-building' in PLCs (Popp & Goldman, 2016) or categorising discrete opportunities to learn that emerge through the discussions that take place in professional meetings (Horn & Kane, 2015).

Dialogue is a variegated and complex phenomenon, with deep philosophical roots which cannot be lengthily explored in this paper, however for the purpose of these arguments we posit that [1] dialogue is a central mechanism for learning in PLCs and [2] not all dialogue is equal: the forms of talk that we consider to be 'educationally productive' possess certain features.

Drawing from Mercer's (2000) concept of 'exploratory talk' and the theoretical and empirical research done by colleagues based at the University of Cambridge and elsewhere, one might propose that educationally productive talk is when participants are mutually participative (as opposed to being dominated by one or two speakers), engage in explicit reasoning, seek to build on, elaborate or explain their and others' contributions (forming intersubjective links between ideas) and are willing to offer contrasting ideas, even disagreement (Mercer et al., 2017). Moreover, Howe (2010) argues that it is desirable when speakers engage in the *process* of seeking consensus, stimulating participants to reflect further on their discussion and consider the evidence and contributions offered by others.

The idea of seeking consensus may appear to contradict the previous point about the importance of disagreement—but there is a subtle yet important difference. From a learning perspective, it is important that dialogue does not get locked into a kind of 'group-think', restricting the conceptual space for thinking about issues and potential solutions. However, seeking consensus can be taken to be a form of making talk more 'accountable' (Resnick, 1999). It does so by incentivising participants to see where their ideas meet and contrast, rather than defaulting to 'agree to disagree', letting their ideas run on 'parallel tracks' rather

than having them 'meet', so to speak. If understood rightly, the process of seeking consensus complements disagreement in conversations.

In simple terms, the research suggests that the kind of talk that is educationally productive is lively, mutually participative, features explicit reasoning and abundant connections between speakers. Speakers would be unafraid to disagree and explain their reasons why, but grapple with the dissonances they face to come to a mutual consensus. If this conceptualisation appears idealistic, that is part of the point – as a theoretical 'ideal type', this concept of productive dialogue can function as a heuristic benchmark to which one may compare one's practice. Based on the research, it is my contention that productive dialogue as conceived in these terms can be a useful guide for teachers engaging in the PLC process as well. Just as Mercer (2005) suggests for his own typology of talk, 'productive dialogue' should not be approached in a performative or rigid manner, as features to tick on a box. What it does allow us to do, however, is have an evidence-based, enumerated vision for how teachers can engage in PLC meetings.

The nature of dialogic interaction is of course also inescapably situated within institutional, cultural and relational contexts, invoking past experiences, shared understandings and common knowledge (Mercer, 2008; Bakhtin, 1986). Having established that dialogue is central to learning in PLCs, the next section proceeds to review some of the communicative and social research done in the Malaysian context, as relevant to PLCs.

## Discussion

### PLCs in Malaysian schools – consider culture and dialogue

Hofstede (2001) argues that culture is a property that permeates all social interactions. While we rightly resist essentialist characterisations or generalisations, there is some usefulness in looking at what social research says about the patterns that characterise the Malaysian context, as I discuss here.

The literature frequently describes Malaysians, broadly speaking, as an indirect people with an aversion to conflict in their speech (Kuang, Wong & David, 2015). Within the Malay community, being non-confrontational (Asrul, 2003) and courteous, or *berbudi bahasa* (Kamisah & Norazlan, 2003) appears to be synonymous with politeness and propriety, or *adab*. This claim is supported by Lim's (2003) paremiological work on Malay proverbs and the 'Malay Mind', where he argues that *budi*, in contrast to dialectical rationality, 'is non-confrontational, non-competitive, gentle, friendly, and succumbing (in the sense of giving in or giving way), because its final goal is consensus and compromise' (p. 31).

A preference for indirectness and an aversion to conflict is said to also manifest among Malaysian Chinese, especially in a multiracial setting, which Ling (1995) suggests is a legacy of the migrant attitude of wanting to prevent 'inviting trouble' upon themselves. As for the Malaysian Indians, some studies suggest that young Malaysian Indians in universities are generally indirect in their communication (Jamaliah, 2000; Suraiya, 2002) although this observation was refined by other research which found that Indian professionals were very direct in their communication, suggesting variance according to social status and professional backgrounds (David & Kuang, 1999, 2005). Whether this observed variance also applies to Chinese and Malays is uncertain and requires further empirical work; however, we can see

how sociolinguistic/communicative language research suggests that indirectness might be relatively pervasive among the major ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Additionally, there is a strand of research in value orientations that we can draw from. Malaysia is said to be a hierarchical (high power distance) and collectivist (group oriented) society (Asma, 1992; Hofstede, 2001). These traits are shown to have a demonstrable impact on PLC practice, specifically the deprivatization of teacher practice, and collective learning and application (Ning, Lee & Lee, 2015). Specifically, it was found that (1) team collectivism positively predicts collegiality and collaboration and that (2) power distance moderates the relationship between collegiality and collaboration (the positive effects of team collegiality on team collaboration were stronger for teams with lower levels of power distance). In simple terms, Ning et al.'s (2015) study would imply that the Malaysian collectivist orientation would support PLCs; however, teachers' collegiality would be less likely to translate to collaborative acts in teams with high levels of power distance.

This argument might be taken further to suggest that high power distance may restrict some of the elements of productive dialogue which we take as theoretically necessary for PLCs to be a site for teacher learning. As it stands, the empirical research already shows that deep collaborative inquiry is difficult and challenging to foster (Le Fevre, Robinson & Sinnema, 2015; Grossman et al., 2001).

Consider Watson's (2014) warning of how the idealistic rhetoric of PLCs can mask deeper problems. The appeal to shared vision and values which comes with PLCs, for example, risks creating social exclusion of those who do not conform to status quo, discouraging diversity among the teacher teams. Ironically, the strong sense of identity and desire to maintain group harmony can be harmful in that they inhibit change, foster groupthink i.e. lead to participation norms that stifle dissent and result in groups working rapidly towards an unchallenged consensus, rather than seeking the best possible approach through a process of explorative challenge (Esser, 1998). When dominated by such social norms, group discussions constrict the conceptual space around the topic to arrive at a seemingly more 'efficient' outcome (Middup, Coughlan & Johnson, 2010).

Put together, it is clear to see how the communicative and value orientations among Malaysians are potentially important considerations for the practice of PLCs. It is possible that Malaysian PLCs benefit from our collective value orientation; however, if, as argued earlier, the mechanism of learning is dialogue, and productive dialogue is characterised by the readiness to challenge each other respectfully, one has to account for the confounding effect of high power distance and communicative indirectness. If, as researchers, we accept Lim's (2003) argument that the spirit of *budi* sometimes necessitates a 'lie' in order to preserve harmony in the heat of the moment of conflict – a lie that is then untangled 'when the heat is over' (p. 31) – then we may find that it is not *during* the PLC meetings when opposing views are debated and resolved, but *after*, perhaps in private after the meeting has dispersed. This has important methodological implications for those who seek to study teacher talk.

Beyond discussing general cultural norms, one may also examine the specific institutional character of Malaysian schools. It has been stated before that the Malaysian education system is one of the most centralised in the world: on the one hand, teachers have comparatively less latitude for decision-making; on the other, there is ostensibly a culture of following orders (Tee, Tan & Symaco, 2018). One might see a parallel to Alatas' (1977) observation that the

nascent education system left in Malaysia by the British was not originally meant to nurture and foster creative thinkers, but to create an efficient and compliant second-line of indigenous administrators who can assist the British in running the country. Both Watson (1982) and Koh (2017) have argued that, despite various changes since the pre-independence era, the essential structure and spirit of the education system set up the British continue to persist.

Tee et al.'s (2018) argument, however, was to trace socio-historical reasons behind (empirically-established) monologicality in *classrooms*, i.e. among students and teachers in classroom settings – quite a different matter to PLCs. Returning to the importance of avoiding essentialist generalisations, I am not suggesting that productive dialogue cannot or does not occur in Malaysian PLC meetings – that is primarily an empirical question, and an important one.

In this section, I attempted to show how even a cursory discussion of socio-cultural context opens new problem spaces for considering the ways in which PLC practice may manifest in the Malaysian context. These new problem spaces allow researchers, teachers and school leaders to ask more clearly defined questions about their work. In the next section, I attempt to contextualise the implications of my arguments for two groups of stakeholders: practitioners and researchers.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to engage in a critical review of PLC research, with the aim of being useful stimulus for practice and further research, especially (though not exclusively) in the Malaysian context. In that review, I demonstrate the many potential merits of PLCs but the important caveats that apply to its implementation in Malaysia. To refine my analysis, I drew from sociocultural theory to highlight the importance of educationally productive dialogue and sociocultural context, highlighting the complications that *may* occur in Malaysian PLCs, based on our cultural specifics as well as the institutional character of schooling. In closing, I now issue a call to action for practitioners and those doing research in education.

## A word for practitioner – a call for reflection

Perhaps the primary take-away for practitioners is that a call for serious, productive dialogue means on the one hand, a sustained focus on teaching and learning; and on the other, a collective readiness to put forward and challenge views, appeal to reason and think together. This certainly applies to teachers and subject panel heads (*ketua panitia*) who convene and participate in PLC meetings, who might gain more from their activities if they attend to the features of productive dialogue (see Mercer, Hennessy & Warwick, 2017; for 'ground rules for talk') and reflect on the professional culture of their teacher teams—particularly on the effect of power distance on professional relationships. In relationships where certain parties have clear and obvious seniority, it may be beholden on them to take initiative to foster the psychological safety for their junior colleagues to share their views, and to establish dialogic norms so that it becomes part of usual practice. For further guidance, see Nelson, Deuel, Slavit & Kennedy's (2010) key principles and sample questions that can be asked to stimulate deep conversations about teaching and learning (pp. 178-9).

Due to Malaysian hierarchical norms, school leaders usually set the tone for PLCs to succeed. Zuraidah Abdullah's (2017) work describes school leaders as 'architects' (p. 87) of PLCs,

with the key role of influencing school culture and establishing shared vision and mission that are so crucial for PLCs. Her assertion is supported by empirical evidence demonstrating that principals influence both *what* teachers choose to undertake in PLCs and *how well* they execute those activities (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). This calls principals (*Pengetua*) and other leaders (*Penolong kanan, ketua bidang*, etc.) to consider how they may best lead and support the professional culture in their schools—where they demonstrate humility and an inquiry stance, others in school are more likely to follow. Furthermore, this can be backed up by ensuring that teachers have structured, shared time and physical space for these collaborative discussions.

### **A word for researchers – moving beyond ‘foreshadowed problems’**

In order to move forward in Malaysian PLC practice, I believe it is not sufficient for researchers to only have the foreshadowed problems I put forward in this article—we must work with practitioners to interrogate these problems and develop stronger, evidence-based claims. Therefore, I propose a research agenda that combines complementary methodological approaches that are both deep and wide.

Firstly, I contend that the state of the field is very much at a ‘question-finding’ stage and as such, requires context-sensitive, exploratory work in naturalistic school settings. These perhaps should draw from ethnographic and anthropological methods, buttressed by robust social and learning theories. Researchers cannot do good work without partnership with schools and education districts, governed by a culture of collegial openness, supported by a Ministry of Education that is pro-research and itself a ‘learning organisation’—that is reflexive, capable of self-critique and responsive to new ideas (Senge, 1990). Moreover, accompanying this research should be more extensive theoretical work than what I have attempted in this paper – perhaps with the involvement of theoreticians and social science researchers in wider academia beyond the traditional Faculties/Schools of Education. On the long term, design-based studies or randomised control trials can play an important role in improving our knowledge of how to implement PLCs as a form of intervention and extending the evidence-base of PLC efficacy—and these are often the methodological expertise of economists and those in the health sciences. The outcomes of such research would not only be significant for the Malaysian research literature but will likely have comparative merits that speak to other contexts.

Few would question that meaningful collaboration and constructive dialogue are important – they are integral not only to learning but to a functioning civil society. The popularity of PLCs as supposed ‘international best practice’ bears testament to that. If, however, the concept is to truly take root and live up to its promise in Malaysia, practitioners and researchers must work together to lead and guide its progress, through seemingly uncharted territory, to achieve our educational aspirations.

I argued at the beginning of this article that the literature suggests PLCs could be a sustainable and viable model or framework for professional learning, but that there are important caveats, visible lacunae in our research knowledge which I believe can be meaningfully filled through the theoretical and methodological efforts recommended in this article. Moreover, I have attempted to demonstrate how research (e.g. in dialogue, culture and communication) can help clarify thinking about PLC practice in the Malaysian context. All in all, I have attempted to bring greater definition into the ‘problem space’ of PLCs, inviting others—be they researchers or practitioners—to offer their own contributions.

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