

## A STUDY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR TEACHERS IN CHINA

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### Abstract

This paper comprehensively analyses the development history, current status, and future direction of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in China's education sector. As a collaborative learning model that promotes teachers' continuous professional development, PLC has gradually moved from being introduced as a pilot programmer to being policy-driven and locally innovative in China. Research has found that PLC can effectively enhance collaboration, experience sharing, and reflection among teachers, thus improving teaching quality. However, the implementation of PLC in China also faces challenges, such as the heavy workload of teachers and the lack of systematic support and professional guidance. Looking to the future, the development of PLC requires further support from policies and systems, the deepening of localised innovations, and the development of teacher autonomy and leadership. In addition, improving assessment and feedback mechanisms and strengthening technical support and resource integration will provide impetus for the sustainable development of PLC. The research in this paper provides useful references for education policymakers, school administrators, and teachers, aiming to promote PLC to play a greater role in China's education reform and to facilitate teachers' professional growth and the improvement of education quality.

**Keywords:** Teacher professional learning community, Teacher professional development, Collaborative learning

### Introduction

In the context of globalisation and informatisation, PLC has attracted much attention as an emerging model of teacher professional development and PLC as a new model of teacher professional development. The concept of a PLC is based on a premise from the business sector regarding the capacity of organisations to learn. (Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. 2008) The core concept of PLC is that collaborative learning, collective reflection and experience sharing among teachers improve teaching quality and promote teachers' professional growth (Jia Zaijun, 2022). his model first originated in Western countries, and with the development of education globalisation, it has gradually been introduced into China and become an important innovation in the field of education. The introduction of PLC not only responds to the trend of education internationalisation but also provides new perspectives and practical paths for China's education reform. The purpose of this paper is to discuss in depth the theoretical foundation, development history, current situation, and challenges faced by PLC and to put forward suggestions for the future development direction. Through a literature review, case study analysis, and other research methods, this paper will analyse the adaptability of PLC in the context of Chinese education, how it affects the professional growth of teachers

and the improvement of teaching quality. In addition, this paper will discuss the role of PLC in promoting educational equity and improving educational quality and how policy support and institutional innovation can further promote the development of PLC in China.

### **Research background**

The background of the emergence and development of China's teachers' PLC is closely related to the country's strategic needs for education quality improvement. In the face of the challenges of globalization and the deepening of domestic education reform, the traditional, isolated model of teacher professional development can no longer meet education requirements in the new era. The introduction of the PLC model provides a new platform for teacher professional learning and growth in the Chinese education sector, emphasising cooperation and sharing among teachers to promote the overall enhancement of teachers' professional competence (Han, Yueqi, 2024).

The implementation of the new curriculum reform, the promotion of school-based training, and the rapid development of information technology have all provided strong support for the popularisation and innovative practice of PLC in China. These reform measures not only provide teachers with more learning resources and tools but also create a more favourable environment for PLC implementation. Through PLC, teachers are able to better adapt to the requirements of education reform, improve the quality of teaching, and realise the common development of individuals and schools.

#### **Significance of the study**

The development of PLC for teachers in China is of great research significance in promoting teachers' professional growth and improving education quality. Firstly, PLC provides teachers with a platform for continuous learning and development, and through collaborative learning, collective reflection and experience sharing, teachers are able to continuously improve their teaching and better adapt to the needs of education reform (Zhao, Wing, 2024). This model helps to break the traditional, isolated model of teachers' professional development, promotes communication and cooperation among teachers, and enhances teachers' professional autonomy and innovation.

Secondly, the implementation of PLC helps to promote the deepening of school-based training and the formation of a collaborative culture within the school. Under the framework of PLC, teachers can discuss teaching issues together and share best practices, thus continuously improving teaching methods and strategies in practice. This kind of practice-based learning not only enhances teachers' teaching effectiveness but also strengthens their sense of professional satisfaction and belonging.

In addition, the development of PLC has helped to solve the problem of formalism in teacher training and enhance the effectiveness of training. Through PLC, teachers are able to learn and grow in real teaching environments rather than relying solely on theoretical training and lectures. This practice-based model of professional development can better meet the practical needs of teachers and enhance the quality of education.

In summary, the study of PLC is not only important for the professional development of individual teachers, but also has far-reaching implications for improving the quality of teaching in schools, promoting education reform and fostering equity in education. Therefore, an in-depth study of PLC development in China has important theoretical and practical value for achieving the goal of modernisation of Chinese education.

## **Theoretical foundations of teacher professional learning communities**

### Definition of a professional learning community for teachers

The concept of teachers' PLC is gradually gaining attention in the Chinese education sector, with a deep and diverse theoretical foundation. The definition of PLC is not limited to a simple cooperative learning group but is an expression of a culture and beliefs aimed at improving the quality of teaching and facilitating the professional growth of teachers through cooperation, reflection, and sharing of experiences (Yu, Yee & Huang, Xiaoli, 2024). The theoretical basis for this teacher-centred professional development model is mainly derived from social constructivist theory and adult learning theory (Andragogy).

The definition of PLC emphasises collaboration and mutual support among teachers that goes beyond simple communication to a deep, learning-oriented collaboration. In PLC, teachers discuss teaching practices, share teaching strategies, and provide feedback to each other for mutual professional development (Yueqi Han, 2024). The formation of such cooperative learning groups not only contributes to the growth of individual teachers but also helps to enhance the teaching and learning of the entire educational team.

### Rationale for Teachers' Professional Learning Communities

One of the theoretical underpinnings of PLC is the theory of social constructivism, which suggests that knowledge is constructed in social interaction rather than passively received (Zhao Zhan et al., 2023). In PLC, teachers co-construct pedagogical knowledge through cooperation and communication, and this process of knowledge construction is interactive, dynamic and closely linked to practice. In addition, Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) provides theoretical support for PLC, which suggests that adult learners are self-directed and prefer to learn by solving practical problems (Li Anfeng et al., 2024). PLC provides an ideal environment for teachers to realise self-directed learning in solving practical pedagogical problems.

### Current status of international PLC development

Internationally, PLC has become an important model for teacher professional development and has been widely used in several countries. Especially in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, PLC has been used significantly in teacher professional development (Jia Zaijun, 2022). Studies in these countries have shown that PLC can significantly enhance teachers' teaching practices, strengthen their teamwork skills, and contribute to the overall quality of education in schools. International experience suggests that the successful implementation of PLC requires the support of school leaders, clear shared goals, and mutual trust and respect among teachers.

The theoretical underpinnings of PLC also include a deeper understanding of teacher professional development. Teacher professional development is no longer seen as a series of isolated training events but rather as an ongoing process that occurs throughout a teacher's career. PLC provides a supportive learning environment that enables teachers to explore, learn and grow. In addition, the theoretical underpinnings of PLC involve an understanding of teachers as learners, emphasising that teachers should be lifelong learners, constantly seeking new knowledge and skills to adapt to the constant changes in the field of education.

## **The development of professional learning communities for teachers in China**

The development of China's teachers' PLC has been a gradual evolutionary process from introduction and piloting to policy promotion, practice expansion, and then localised exploration and innovation. This process not only reflects the needs of China's education reform but also the influence of international education trends.

#### Early development: introduction and piloting

At the beginning of the 21st century, with the acceleration of globalisation, the PLC model was introduced in China as one of the key achievements of Western educational reform. The main feature of this phase was the piloting through collaborative projects between the Ministry of Education and foreign educational institutions (Han Yueqi, 2024). These pilot projects were mainly focused on the basic education stage and aimed to improve teachers' pedagogical competence and professionalism through collaborative learning, collective reflection and experience sharing. During this period, the concept and practice of PLC attracted widespread attention in the Chinese education sector, but its application was relatively limited, confined mainly to some model schools and programmers.

#### Medium-term Development: Policy Drivers and Practice Expansion

After entering 2010, PLC began to be promoted nationwide as an effective way of teacher training as China's education policy placed greater emphasis on teacher professional development (Xueshan Li, 2024). During this period, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a series of policy documents to emphasise the importance of teacher professional development and to encourage schools to establish PLC in order to promote collaboration and exchange among teachers. The introduction of these policies provided policy support and direction for the development of PLC, which led to a rapid expansion of PLC practice from the basic education stage to the higher education and vocational education sectors. At the same time, this phase also witnessed the diversification of PLC practice models, with different regions and schools exploring PLC models suitable for local teachers' professional development according to their own characteristics.

#### Recent developments: localised exploration and innovation

In recent years, with the implementation of the "New College Entrance Examination Reform" and the "Double Reduction Policy", teachers' needs for professional learning have become more urgent, and the scope of PLC application has been further expanded (Zhao, Yong, 2024). Against this background, more and more schools and educational organisations have begun to explore innovative pathways to integrate PLC with China's local educational culture. These explorations involve not only the organisational form and operational mechanism of PLC but also the goal setting, content selection and effect evaluation of PLC. For example, some schools try to combine PLC with school-based training to solve specific problems in teaching practice through the PLC platform; others use PLC to promote the improvement of teachers' scientific research capacity and facilitate the transformation of teachers from teaching-oriented to research-oriented.

In the process of localised exploration, PLC implementation has gradually been integrated with the actual needs of Chinese education. For example, in response to the lack of resources for teachers in rural areas, some regions have attempted to achieve resource sharing and mutual cooperation between urban and rural teachers through remote PLC platforms. In addition, with the development of information technology, the construction of online PLC platforms has also become an important direction for the localisation of PLC innovation, providing teachers with more flexible and convenient professional learning pathways.

Overall, the development of teacher-professional learning communities in China reflects a gradual deepening process from introduction and piloting to policy promotion, practice expansion, and then localised exploration and innovation. This process reflects not only the needs of China's education reform but also the influence of international education trends. As PLCs deepen in China's educational practice, their role in promoting teachers' professional development and improving educational quality will become more significant.

## **Analysis of the current situation of professional learning communities for teachers in China**

The Chinese Teachers' PLC, as an emerging model of professional development for teachers, has been widely promoted and applied nationwide. However, the advantages and effectiveness of its implementation, as well as the problems and challenges, are worth analysing and exploring in depth.

### **Strengths and Effectiveness**

The promotion of PLC in Chinese education has shown significant advantages. Firstly, PLC provides a collaborative learning platform for teachers, which not only promotes experience sharing among teachers but also enhances the ability to reflect on teaching (Jia Zaijun, 2022). Through this platform, teachers are able to learn from each other and discuss teaching strategies together, thus enhancing teaching quality. Secondly, the PLC model emphasises learning by doing, which encourages teachers to improve their professional skills by solving practical problems in teaching. This problem-oriented learning approach enables teachers to be more flexible in responding to the challenges of educational practice and effectively improve their teaching.

In addition, PLC promotes the deepening of school-based learning and the building of a collaborative culture within the school. In the PLC environment, teachers are no longer isolated individuals but become part of a learning community. This change in culture helps teachers to improve their teaching methods in practice continuously and, at the same time, enhances their sense of belonging to the school and the spirit of teamwork. Finally, the development of PLC provides theoretical support for the formulation and implementation of educational policies and lays the foundation for building a high-quality teaching force (Xueshan Li, 2024).

### **Problems and challenges**

Despite the development of PLC in China, there are some challenges. Firstly, teachers have a heavy workload, which makes it difficult for them to find time to participate actively in PLC activities. Teachers must undertake many tasks such as teaching and research, lesson planning, and grading assignments in addition to their daily teaching duties, which undoubtedly increases their difficulty in participating in PLC (Zhao Zhan et al., 2023).

Secondly, some schools lacked systematic support and professional guidance for PLC implementation. This has resulted in PLC activities often being formalised and lacking in depth and effectiveness. In some cases, PLC may have been established merely in response to policy requirements rather than out of a genuine need to enhance teachers' professional development. Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. (Du Four, R. 2004). Therefore, how to ensure the quality of PLC activities has become an urgent issue.

In addition, China's educational culture places more emphasis on teachers' individual achievements, which affects the formation of a sense of collective cooperation. In the traditional concept of education, teachers' individual abilities and achievements are often overemphasised to the detriment of teamwork. This cultural background may lead to teachers' weak willingness to cooperate in PLC and affect the effective operation of PLC.

Finally, the evaluation and feedback mechanisms for PLC are not yet perfect. Currently, there is often a lack of quantitative and qualitative research on the evaluation of the effectiveness of PLC, which makes it difficult for educational decision-makers to accurately grasp the actual effectiveness of PLC, thus affecting the continued investment in and optimisation of PLC. Therefore, the establishment of an effective evaluation and feedback mechanism is crucial to the long-term development of PLC.

## Future directions

International evidence suggests that educational reform's progress depends on teachers' individual and collective capacity and its link with school-wide capacity for promoting pupils' learning. (Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. 2006). With a global push for better teaching as foundational to improved student outcomes, building capacity for school improvement across whole schools and across the entire teaching workforce remains a challenge. (Gore, J., & Rosser, B. 2022). In the face of the current state of development of PLC for teachers in China, the future direction of development needs to take into account a number of aspects, including policy support, localised innovation, and the development of teacher autonomy and leadership, in order to ensure that PLC is able to serve better the professional development of teachers and the enhancement of the quality of education.

### Policy support and institutional safeguards

Firstly, the government's policy support and institutional guarantee are the key factors that promote the further development of PLC in China. There is a need for the government to provide more guarantees in terms of time, resources and funding to create conditions for teachers to participate in PLC activities (Jia Zaijun, 2022). This may include providing teachers involved in PLC with time flexibility, necessary financial support, and resources for professional development. In addition, the education sector should develop a series of systems to regulate and guide the implementation of PLC to ensure that PLC activities can be carried out in an orderly manner and achieve the desired results. These systems may involve the organisational structure, operational mechanism, assessment criteria, etc. of PLC in order to promote the healthy and sustainable development of PLC.

### Localised innovation

Secondly, the localised innovation of PLC is an important way to enhance their adaptability and effectiveness in the Chinese educational environment. PLC in China should be innovated in the context of local educational cultures and practices, especially taking into account regional differences and the diversity of educational practices (Han, Yueqi, 2024). In rural areas, PLC can serve as an effective way for teachers to collaborate and develop, bridging geographical constraints and promoting a balanced distribution of educational resources through distance learning and online platforms. In addition, localised innovation of PLC should also include localised adaptation of PLC objectives and content to ensure that PLC activities meet the actual needs of Chinese teachers and the characteristics of the educational environment.

### Teacher Autonomy and Leadership Development

In the development of PLC, teacher autonomy and leadership are key factors in their success. Schools and educational organisations should provide teachers with more autonomy and encourage them to take the lead in PLC (Li Anfeng et al., 2024). This may involve teachers' participation in decision-making, activity design and assessment feedback in PLC. By giving teachers more autonomy, their identification and involvement in PLC can be enhanced, thus increasing the activity and innovation of PLC. Meanwhile, leadership plays a significant role in the ability of a school to become a professional learning community that enhances student learning. (Thompson, S. C., Gregg, L., & Niska, J. M. 2004). Teacher leadership development is also an important way to enhance the effectiveness of PLC. Teacher leadership includes not only the ability to organise and coordinate PLC activities but also the ability to guide and motivate teachers' professional development. Schools can help teachers improve their leadership skills by providing leadership training and establishing a mentoring system. In addition, the development of teacher leadership should also focus on teachers' self-reflection and continuous learning and encourage teachers to explore and innovate in PLC to meet the needs of education reform.

### Improvement of evaluation and feedback mechanisms

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of PLC, it is essential to establish and improve evaluation and feedback mechanisms. This entails regular evaluation of PLC activities and collection of feedback from teachers, students, and other stakeholders to assess the effectiveness of PLC and provide suggestions for improvement. Assessment indicators may include aspects such as teacher engagement, improvement in teaching practices, and student learning outcomes. Through effective evaluation and feedback, the activities of PLC can be adjusted and optimised promptly to ensure that they better serve the professional development of teachers and the improvement of education quality.

### Technical Support and Resource Integration

With the rapid development of information technology, it has become possible to use technology to support the development of PLC. By establishing an online PLC platform, teachers can be provided with more flexible and convenient ways of communication and cooperation. At the same time, by integrating all kinds of educational resources, such as online courses, teaching resource libraries and research databases, teachers can be provided with richer and more diverse learning resources. These technical support and resource integration can not only improve the efficiency and quality of PLC but also expand the influence and coverage of PLC.

In conclusion, the future direction of China's teacher professional learning communities needs to take into account a variety of factors and jointly promote the development of PLC through policy support, localised innovation, the development of teacher autonomy and leadership, the improvement of assessment and feedback mechanisms, and technical support and resource integration, in order to realise the goals of teachers' professional growth and the enhancement of the quality of education.

## Conclusion

The promotion and application of PLC for teachers in the Chinese education sector have demonstrated their significant value in promoting teachers' professional growth and enhancing the quality of education. After an in-depth study of PLC, it is clear that PLC, as an innovative model of professional development for teachers, has made remarkable progress in China's education reform. Through collaborative learning, collective reflection and experience sharing, PLC provides a platform for teachers to promote professional growth, enhance collaboration and communication among teachers, and improve the quality of teaching practice. Although PLCs have achieved some success in China, they also face a series of challenges, such as teachers' heavy workloads, the lack of systematic support from policies and institutions, the impact of an individualistic culture on the sense of cooperation, the uneven distribution of resources, and imperfections in assessment and feedback mechanisms.

In the face of these challenges, the way forward needs to take into account several factors. Firstly, the government and the education sector need to provide more policy support and institutional safeguards to provide the necessary time, resources and financial support for teachers to participate in PLC activities and to develop a system that regulates and guides the implementation of PLC. Secondly, localised innovations in PLC are key to enhancing their adaptability and effectiveness in the Chinese educational environment, which means that PLC practices need to be integrated with Chinese educational culture and practices, taking into account regional differences and the diversity of educational practices. In addition, the development of teacher autonomy and leadership is also key to the success of PLC, and schools and educational organisations should provide teachers with more autonomy and support them to take a leading role in PLC. At the same time, the establishment and improvement of evaluation and feedback mechanisms for PLC is crucial to ensure their effectiveness and

sustainability, and the effectiveness of PLC activities needs to be regularly evaluated, adjusted and optimised based on feedback. Finally, the development of information technology provides PLC with new support and opportunities for resource integration, and the construction of online PLC platforms can provide teachers with more flexible and convenient ways of communication and cooperation while integrating all kinds of educational resources to improve the efficiency and quality of PLC.

Overall, the application of PLC in China's education sector is promising, but it still requires sustained efforts and exploration in terms of policy support, localised innovation, teacher autonomy and leadership development, improvement of assessment and feedback mechanisms, as well as technical support and resource integration. Through these measures, PLC is expected to continue to promote the professional development of Chinese teachers and the improvement of education quality in the future and make greater contributions to the long-term development of Chinese education. With the continuous optimisation and improvement of the PLC model, it is foreseeable that it will play an increasingly important role in promoting the modernisation of Chinese education and building a learning society.

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