A professional learning community (PLC) for the new teacher professionalism - the case of a state-led initiative in Singapore schools

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Abstract
This paper seeks to explore the empirical fit of two PLC models, using Singapore as a case. Insights emerged from documentary analyses and interviews with state-affiliated agents from the Academy of Singapore Teachers. The proposed DuFour-Fullan model, despite policy aspirations, remains largely DuFour-predominant in practice. Aspirations for a Fullan-inspired approach are evident, but still rest in the stage of conceptualization.

Keywords: professional learning community (PLC), DuFour-Fullan PLC model, new teacher professionalism, teacher professional development, state-led professional learning community, Singapore case study,

1. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR “NEW TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM”

Two decades after the conceptualization of Professional Learning Community (PLC) as the platform for the realization of the “new professionalism” in education, there continues to be a lack of consensus over the efficacy of professional learning communities at sustaining deep reform. A close scrutiny of the debates over the aspired teacher professionalism points to similar paradoxes emergent from the theorization of Professional Learning Community. Underpinning the contentions over what encompasses meaningful and sustainable professional learning communities is the disjuncture between changing notions of teacher professionalism, built upon grounds antithetical to that delineated by established teacher professional bodies (Beck, 2008). While traditional professional bodies function under the assumption of institutions as the transmitters of the knowledge, and teachers as passive receptors of externally imposed standards, the collaborative and inquiry-based teacher professionalism assumes teachers as knowing agents (Reeves, 2007). Doubts over whether the “new professionalism” meant anything more than merely the reinvention of “accountability” (Beck, 2008), “standards and outcomes” (Nixon, 2001) accompanied the discomfort with the absence of professional development geared towards a value-oriented and reflexive teacher professionalism (Nixon, 2001). Evans
is exact in distilling the tension between the two discursive orders as the persistence of the externally-imposed “prescribed” professionalism, and the challenges to realizing the aspired “enacted” professionalism (2008). Translated into empirical practice, education systems worldwide proclaiming the embracement of Professional Learning Community may in reality hold divergent conceptions of the movement. This results in distinctive pathways to professional development. The disjuncture, within the context of the PLC, may be represented by pronged trajectory to the theorization of the professional learning community.

Professional Learning Community for Collaborative and Reflexive Teacher Professional Development

The notion of Professional Learning Community first takes root from Dewey’s emphasis that reflection is the “central modality of human intellect” (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011, p. 514). The resolution of recurring knowledge gaps is hinged upon a continuous and cyclical process of reflection upon the take-for-granted assumptions that limits one’s actions, thereby narrowing one’s professional efficacy (Dewey, 1986). Reflective inquiry is performed with the view of changing growth-inhibiting habits (Dewey, 1983). At the collaborative level, professional learning takes place when practitioners engage in the resolution of conflicts through reflective dialogues (Lewin, 1997; Schon, 1983; Senge, 1990, 2000). In Bernstein’s words, knowledge acquisition is facilitated by embracing “fallibilistic pluralism”. (Bernstein, 1992) The term encompasses the belief that knowledge shared from diverse sources is richer than uncontested beliefs conceived within the minds of isolated individuals. Hord’s proposition that the PLC provides a collaborative professional learning experience is spawned within this intellectual context (Hord, 1997).

The Professional Learning Community’s postmodern slant towards teacher professional development takes shape within the context of the knowledge economy, which sets the conditions for a departure from the way professional development was traditionally perceived (Shumar, 2009). In particular, policymakers, schools and researchers are interested in how PLCs are faring in the facilitation of 21st century collaborative learning. With the offerings of the social media and open-access knowledge by the internet, teachers are in a better position to take charge of their own professional growth. Learning has become a lifelong endeavour, as teacher education no longer needs to be contained within a finite pre-service program (Niemi, 2002, 2008; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). With the realization that teachers cannot do it alone in the isolation of their classrooms, the PLC school
movement represents the aspirations for teacher collaborative networks to tackle the challenges of the new order (Hamos et al., 2009; Hargreaves, 2003; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2007). With the widening of space for dialogues and diversity of voices, tensions inevitably surface in professional environments (Pella, 2011). Emergent from this is a rising emphasis for openness in embracing conflict (Stoll et al., 2006), and in maintaining trust amidst differences (Vescio, et al., 2007). If the commitment to embrace conflict is to be upheld, the notion of shared values can no longer be a forethought conceived by policymakers or the principal in the drawing room (Hamos, et al., 2009; Louis & Marks, 1998; Vescio, et al., 2007). Authentic values that work in setting the school climate need to be organically conceived from the emergent dialogues amongst teachers (Fullan, 1993).

Schools of Thought on the Professional Learning Community

As debates rage over its conceptual premises (Stoll, et al., 2006; Wiley, 2001), there remains however, two distinguishable schools of thought on the Professional Learning Community. For the sake of conceptual clarity, we refer to the two schools by their leading thought leaders. On the one hand, Richard and Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker wins recognition for the systematic and parsimonious mapping of the aims, processes, and desired outcomes of doing professional learning communities. On the other hand, Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan inspire with the potential for deep and sustainable school reform executed by “complexity strategists” (Fullan, 2003, p. 69). The two schools are conceptually distinguishable by three premises: collaborative learning, reflective dialogue and treatment of conflict.

Collaborative Learning

A community-based professional learning involves collaborative efforts. The interpretation of how collaboration is to unfold on the ground, however, is far from unitary. Opinions range from the prescriptive view of collaboration as a means to establishing consensus over teaching practice (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010), or for conflict-ridden negotiations between “collective obligation” and “individual preference” (Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2007; Fullan, 2003; Little, 2002a, 2002b). There is also a lack of consensus over the nature of content to be discussed in the learning teams. The DuFour school saw tangible outcomes as central to team discussions, such as joint problem-solving or team efforts in improving pedagogy and curriculum (Campbell, 2005). Others see to the root of
collaborative professional learning in the form of reflective dialogues, and outcomes as a means to this end (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Musanti & Lucretia, 2010). Student learning and outcomes emerge inductively from knowledge co-construction networks, and/or the building of professional cultures and networks of peers and mentors (Harris, 2011). Furthermore, views of PLC as a network where novices gain knowledge from experts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) differ from beliefs that learning is two-way between them (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Menkhoff, Chay, Loh, & Evers, 2010).

Reflective Dialogue

The second issue of concern in the conceptualization of Professional Learning Community lies within how true PLCs are to remain to its intellectual roots in reflective dialogue. The divergences, once again, emerge along the lines of the nature of reflections. That is, whether reflection is for gaining deep insights (Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995; Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011) and cultural re-orientation (Wong, 2010b) a la Dewey, or for concrete matters such as problem-solving and enhancement of teaching practice (McLaughlin, 1992; Schon, 1983). Professional learning communities are expected to share some common understanding as to the values/aims/vision/action as a community. However, the lack of consensus remains as to whether this sharing extends to the sharing of higher-level aspirations as propounded by Fullan (1991) and Louis and Kruse (1995), or an exercise to align mass opinions with those of the elite (Elmore, 1996; McLaughlin, 1992; Rosenholtz, 1989; Wiley, 2001), or simply limited to depending on each other to get the job done (Dooner, et al., 2007).

Treatment of Conflict

Thirdly, under the Fullan-inspired school, conflict forms the central feature of learning. As the learning environment is characterized by indeterminacy, learning interests are realistically conflicting in nature. (Little, 1993, 1995, 2002a, 2002b) A resilient professional identity is thus the outcome of constant negotiation, forged by attempts at conflict reconciliation. DuFour, in contrast, emphasizes a consensus-driven professional identity, forged by a results-oriented focus on student learning (DuFour, et al., 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Marks, 1998) With regard to conflict, a mid-range treatment of conflict also prevails. A process-based lens examines how novices acquire professional identities from experts. (McLaughlin &
Talbert, 2006) While novices and experts may possess different views of their professional identities, the views eventually converge as the novice gains expertise.

2. EMPIRICAL REALITY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

If Professional Learning Community in the ideal type already defies a unitary interpretation, its application in empirical reality is expected to be highly complex. International comparisons of PLC movements point to empirical cases seeking the reconciliation of the paradox between efficiency and validity.

Following the Decree on Teacher Education (2006) in Belgium, the marketization of education systems mounts pressure for an efficient and targeted professional learning trajectory. (Simons & Kelchtermans, 2008) While the authors call for a retake against professional erosion due to “managerial professionalism” (p. 292), it seems policy-wise, the imperative of “meeting the demands” (p. 287) may result professional orientations that veer towards the DuFour school.

Works in the United States present cases appear to foretell the outcome of the Flemish policy. Levine and Marcus argue through an empirical example where conflict-avoidance strategies in PLCs constrain, rather than facilitate teacher learning. (2010). Case studies of Hipp and associates (2008), subscribing to the Fullan school, show emerging issues of sustainability of professional learning communities if deeper systemic issues, such as school culture, continue to be overlooked. Nehring and Fitzsimons (2011), through instances of public high schools in northeastern United States, echo the same sentiments by hailing Professional Learning Community as “a subversive activity” and a “counter-culture of conventional schooling” (p. 513). Through another case study, Rousseau observes the necessity of addressing conflict, alongside shared beliefs, while confronting the challenge of reform via collaborative learning (2004).

Education systems in Asia embarking upon the initiation of professional learning communities produces a divergent take that reinforces the DuFour view. Wong, using case studies from Shanghai China, puts forth Professional Learning Community as a tool to surface good practices and combating teacher individualism. (2010b) The imperative of shared goals, visions and practices as PLC goals was communicated. In another work, the same author argues for the prioritization of DuFour-inspired PLC due to the distinctive context of the exam-oriented, centrally-driven nature of the Chinese education system (2010a). Lee and associates presents a contrasting case in Chinese Hong Kong, where issues of trust and efficacy put to

3. STATE-LED IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE

This paper seeks to explore the empirical fit of two predominant PLC models, using Singapore as a case for this inquiry. Out of the Euro-American region, Singapore is the only empirical case where professional learning communities are implemented at an extensive scale via state-led initiatives. Unlike state-led counterparts in the United Kingdom and the United States, however, Singapore initiative had relied on the adaptation of prevalent PLC models developed by its state-led predecessors. On the one hand, UK PLC supporters predominantly look to the Fullan model. On the other hand, US PLC subscribers largely swear by the DuFour model. Singapore, therefore, makes for an interesting case study with its adaptation of a hybrid DuFour-Fullan model to chart its way forward.

Insights of this paper emerged from documentary analyses and interviews with AST collaborators and school leaders in a research collaboration between AST and National Institute of Education (Singapore) over the course of two years. In this study where participating PLC schools were observed to establish a baseline for the professional learning activities among teachers, we found the proposed DuFour-Fullan model, despite policy statements and aspirations, remains largely a DuFour-predominant approach in practice. Aspirations for a Fullan-inspired approach are evident, but still rest in the stage of conceptualization.

Background to PLC movement in Singapore schools

The general perception of how policy initiatives take root in Singapore is one of pervasive state guidance in all realms of the Singapore society (Brown, 1994). Subsumed under the Ministry of Education (MOE), the education realm is no exception. Given this impression, the history of how the PLC movement has taken root in Singapore should logically commence with the Minister of Education, Dr. Ng Eng Hen’s announcement at the 2009 Work Plan Seminar of the scheme to enhance teacher professionalism via PLCs (Ng, 2009).

Under the Minister’s instruction, the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) is to launch PLCs in 50 pilot schools and review the effectiveness of this
implementation in a year to come. More than 300 schools have joined this AST-PLC initiative over 4 phases: the Pilot phase in 2009, and Phases 1, 2, and 3 in 2010, 2011 and 2012 respectively. When a movement becomes an implementation, conceptual boundaries need to be clearly defined to provide coherence (Fullan, 2003). A meaningful discussion of PLCs in Singapore, hence, requires a critical investigation of how the construct is conceptualized and communicated to the schools.

A hybrid DuFour-Fullan model of PLC

The AST-PLC initiative has been conceptualized under a hybrid model, termed the “PLC Model for (Singapore) Schools” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). The AST, being well-attuned to the ongoing intellectual conversations on professional learning communities, adapted from DuFour (DuFour, et al., 2010) and Fullan (Fullan, 2003) in search of a synthesized direction for their implementation. Inspired by the DuFour lens, the AST seeks to instil in Singapore schools “Three Big Ideas”: “ensuring that students learn”; “building a culture of collaboration”; and “focusing on student outcomes” (Academy of Singapore Teachers, 2012, pp. 7-10). Although given less attention in the actual communications by AST to schools, references to Fullan were made through the reiteration of “Fullan’s Triangle of Success”: “deep pedagogy” (i.e. teachers should endeavour to enhance their own content and pedagogical knowledge), “systemness” (i.e. while working within the structural affordances available within the schools they teach in) and “school leadership” (i.e. school leaders should support teachers in this endeavour) (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 6). This emphasis provided the mediating factor to the strong standardization drive propounded by a DuFour slant. In order to make sense of the implications of this PLC model, we seek to locate this conceptual framework within international scholarly dialogues, so as to establish a scope for theoretical comparison.

An examination of how AST communicates the notion of collaborative learning enlightens on the initiative’s location in the PLC framework. The AST’s emphasis on “collaboration rather than collegiality” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 9) demonstrates the awareness that collaborative learning encompasses more than just casual chats to build esprit de corps (Schleicher, 2011). In fact, its initial interpretation of collaborative dialogue is hinged upon the enhancement of content knowledge, or pedagogical practices (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 14). In contrast, Fullan sees collaboration as key to address knowledge gaps in the enhancement of content knowledge, the sharpening of teaching practice, and often overlooked, to
reignite the moral conviction of the teaching profession. (Fullan, 2003, p. 19) The latter departs from teaching teachers the "how-to"s in the "doable and practical". Instead, the "deeper deliberations about questions of intention, purpose and responsibility" were tackled. Surveying the intellectual traditions of the Fullan approach, it can be said, hence, that the AST’s interpretation of collaboration converges with DuFour’s, more than it does with Fullan’s. The responsibility of setting organizational culture and climate is almost exclusively seen as the purview of school leaders (Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 16-19).

The importance of reflective dialogue was not explicitly mentioned in AST communications to schools (Academy of Singapore Teachers, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2010). The closest allusion to collaborative reflection was mentioned in the form of “teacher conversation about their work” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 9). Resources were provided for personal reflection, but in the form of templates unaccompanied by elaboration. (Ministry of Education, 2010: Ch. 8) By far, when collaborative culture and reflection are mentioned, they tend to refer to working together for student outcomes. Characteristic of the pragmatic slant of Singapore policy implementations (Chua, 1985), fidelity to intellectual roots is low in priority if it is unaccompanied by demonstrable outcome. Fullan’s belief that “If test scores go up and engagement doesn’t deepen, improvement will be superficial and unsustainable” (Fullan, 2003, p. 69) is hence unlikely to characterize the orientation of the AST-PLC implementation. In contrast, DuFour’s pitch for “focus on student outcomes” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 9) appears to be more attention grabbing due to the immediately demonstrable outcomes promised by a reform pitched in this direction. Although the building of teacher capacity is mentioned, it seems the AST stands somewhere closer to the “the logician” than the “complexity strategist”, and reflection for reflection’s sake has yet to arrive into the list of factors to be considered as an integral part of the PLC agenda:

"The logician, and even the moralist, may object, since teacher efficacy is a means to the more important goals is student learning. The complexity strategist would also agree literally but would say that teacher capacity is so easily missed in present circumstances that we better highlight it." (Fullan, 2003)

The outcome-directed focus, if driven positively, may eventually devolve into a culture of excellence that hinges upon the moral conviction of care for students. On the flipside, our worry is the divestment of teacher autonomy on the pretext of student outcomes. This scenario may be made plausible when the slogan is upheld alongside a lack of attention given to the importance of teachers as autonomous and
reflective practitioners. The second scenario tends to build dependency upon an elite core to function as the brains of the organization.

By far, the AST has been silent on the treatment of conflict. Given the state principle of “consensus, not conflict” (Shared Values White Paper, 1991), the AST, as a state-linked agency, is obliged to be concordant with the political climate within which it is situated. In contrast, Fullan makes explicit the utility of collaboration as a reform tool that subjects existing knowledge to the critical scrutiny of diverse opinions (Fullan, 2003, p. 47). Hence, iterations of DuFour’s focus on the utility of the PLC as a platform for forging consensus out of professional learning tends to be foregrounded (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 9). This, however, does not preclude that conflict is not embraced and accommodated to. The silence, however, does make it more challenging to locate where AST stands in principle towards the matter. It will also be more challenging to anticipate how the implementation will unfold on the ground.

Although the AST’s PLC model is said to be the cross-fertilization of DuFour’s and Fullan’s, the outcome of this hybridization, at least conceptually, appears to comprise greater elements of DuFour’s. A plot of the AST’s conceptual orientation, within the on-going dialogues about the construct, can be represented in Figure 1:

INSERT “Figure 1: Conceptual map of AST inclinations toward the theorization of PLC” about here.

Conceptual choices serve to enlighten the implementing agent’s view of what is deemed propitious for Singapore schools. The ensuing section, examines if the application of this concept by the AST converges with the professed model.

PLC Implementation in Singapore Schools

On the one hand, the DuFour model (DuFour, et al., 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Marks, 1998), from which the AST predominantly subscribes to, is characterized by a prescriptive, product-oriented slant. On the other hand, Fullan, whose ideas from which the AST had also appropriated, expressly articulates his disapproval of PLC-a-la-DuFour (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Given a hybridized model of two conceptually opposed orientations, the Singapore implementation makes for an interesting case study for how this initiative is to be communicated by the AST to the schools.
DuFour-inspired approaches are often criticized as exercises to align mass opinions with those of the elite (Elmore, 1996; McLaughlin, 1992; Rosenholtz, 1989; Wiley, 2001). In view of the AST’s conceptual inclination towards the DuFour model, we worry about the possible limitations imposed upon the potential for PLC as a reform tool. At the implementation level, however, the AST approach appears to espouse some, although limited Fullan-inspired aspirations. With regard to the operationalization of the concept, the AST inclines towards Fullan’s reform model, characterized by the following:

"One can be clear and inspiring about the goals and the direction, and then set up more flexible strategies and processes for getting there (which often ends up redefining some of the goals)." (Fullan, 2003, p. 67)

The AST sought to offer policy coherence to schools with a conceptually tight model of the PLC, but exercised openness in the observation of the guidelines for PLC implementation in schools. Taking a lesson from scholars of education reform that contextual factors mediate implementation (Fullan, 2003; Scheckler & Barab, 2009; Shumar, 2009), autonomy is given to school leaders to ensure that PLCs are implemented with due consideration to authentic learning. The drive for standardization, highly propounded by the DuFour model, is much less pronounced in practice. Schools are given the allowance to opt out of the AST collaboration, if they deem fit to practice a differently-oriented PLC model. When asked if reasons are provided by schools for turning down the collaboration offer (about 30 schools), an AST official shares the agency’s view, that it is a non-issue for “schools to turn us down because they have their own brand of PLC, or for other unspecified reasons.” (AST Official 2, 15 November 2011). A healthy attitude towards change culture is also acknowledged by the AST as essential. In the Starter Kit issued to Singapore schools, the kit commences with a quote from Fullan, “The basic purpose, in my view, is to change the culture of school systems, not to produce a series of atomistic schools, however collaborative they may be internally” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 4).

However, the manner in which Fullan’s reform-oriented approach is propounded, calls for attention. Evident in Fullan’s works, the driving force of change is conflict (2003). Firstly, according to this view, authentic values that work in setting the school climate need to be organically conceived from the emergent dialogues amongst teachers (Fullan, 1993). Secondly, it cautions about school reforms degenerating into contrived collegiality. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) While large-scale reforms need clearly prescribed guidelines, being overly prescriptive about how teachers are to build their own professional capacities breeds apathy. Thirdly,
change is seen in the light of incremental and qualitative improvements, rather than pitched against the yardstick of quantitative standard indicators of “success” (Fullan, 2007). In other words, as the learning environment is characterized by indeterminacy, learning interests are realistically conflicting in nature. (Little, 1993, 1995, 2002a, 2002b) A resilient professional identity is thus the outcome of constant negotiation, forged by attempts at conflict reconciliation. Based on this model, professional learning communities have the potential of giving rise to progressive pedagogical orientations, where learning is emergent from teacher engagement in reflective dialogues about their professional role within the school environment (Hamos, et al., 2009; Hogan & Gopinathan, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Musanti & Lucretia, 2010; Vescio, et al., 2007; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Under this view, reflection is for gaining deep insights (Louis, et al., 1995; Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011) and cultural re-orientation (Wong, 2010b).

4. DISCUSSION

The Singapore case has a better explanatory fit with the DuFour model, even though the Fullan alternative is much-aspired. Although a professed aspiration of reaching out to higher level aspirations of shared national school culture is expressed by the AST, the agency continues the cautious approach towards the embrace of conflict. This cautiousness needs to be understood in relation to the Singapore context.

Structural factors pose tensions to realizing a hybrid PLC model

Two key factors stood out in the Singapore history. Firstly, postcolonial state leaders in Singapore inherited an advanced state apparatus from the British (Brown, 1994). This was instrumental in the taming and depoliticization of an emergent civil consciousness among teacher and student unions (T. Lee, 2002). Within this leitmotif, buzzwords such as “conflict-driven” and “subversive” are taboo in the Singapore context. Secondly, the severe space constraints of the country mandated the concentration of its population in a highly urbanized setting (IEA, 2009). Coupled with weak civil checks and balances, centralization drives hyper-instrumentality, qualified by stellar economic growth self-attributed solely to the genius of state leaders (Low, 2001). Where national esteem is to be derived from wealth accumulation, and alternative worldviews dismissed as “anti-development” dogmatism, the mission of the education ministry, thus, is the engineering of a

Reiterating the historical leitmotif of the nation-state, the DuFour model appeals to the AST because of its strong emphasis on an unrelenting focus on consensus-driven standardization and the delivery of tangible results of learning among students (DuFour, et al., 2010). Collaboration is driven by the singular purpose of focusing on student learning, so as to deliver concrete proof of student outcomes (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). For instance, when teachers come together to establish a consensus over the school curriculum, a direct causal relationship can be assumed from the measurement of the differences in the grades of students who were previously exposed to an arbitrary set of curriculum before the standardization. In contrast, reflective dialogue in its most authentic sense, involves thinking and debating over existing school cultures and practices with the aim of a cultural re-orientation (Wong, 2010b). As benefits from higher-level professional engagements are harder to prove empirically with less sophisticated instruments such as student examination results, they tend to be given much less attention in result-oriented environments.

The remarkable statesmanship at manufacturing a result-oriented workforce won accolades of being a “terrific money-making machine” (Kluver & Low, 2006, p. 2). A strong developmental imperative that brooks no tolerance for “growth compromising demands from specialist interest groups” (Low, 2001, p. 413), inevitably, tends to stifle reflective inquiry and the courage to voice disagreement. Hargreaves and Fullan’s call for the prioritization of the moral value of education, crystallized in their recent work on Professional Capital (2012), hence appears out-of-place to Singapore’s hyper-instrumentalist leitmotif. That being said, social engineering efforts, implanted and observed through emulation, may lead to ramifications, “sometimes disruptively and unintentionally” (Brown, 1994, p. 1). One education-related backlash is found in the significant gap between the highest and lowest performers of Singapore students in international testing results (Martin, Mullis, & Foy, 2008, pp. 68, 70). Fullan is astute in pointing out that too wide a gap can result in social ramifications that may be costly to fix (2010). Overly zealous initiatives that worked in Singapore’s history of state interventionism may hinder future unforeseen imperatives. While interventionist efforts may be worth the while, they are best introduced with moderation.

Continued centralized control, while allowing for diverse voices
An interventionist approach is efficient, but liable to pitfalls. This is especially so within a knowledge-based environment. Bruce (2009) points out the limitations of top-down dissemination of innovation, in that teachers do not possess the level of conceptual expertise required to ensure that the values expounded by PLC efforts are observed. Firstly, although teachers may be open to prescriptive instruction, the learning accrued from emulation may not be as optimal as one organically conceived from the direct engagement in reflective inquiry (Bruce, 2009, p. 51). Furthermore, a prescriptive approach wrongfully assumes that the values expounded by “PLC experts” are more important or better than the ones held on the ground. (Fullan, 2007). The intention of devolving professional learning from the exclusive domain of expert-led workshops may be better optimized if teachers have greater confidence in their efficacy towards collaborative learning. Due credit should be given to the AST at refrain from dealing the implementation with a heavy-hand. It remains to be seen if teachers will find their own interpretation of PLCs by adapting the initiative to suit their immediate learning needs, while still being able to push forth with the quest for developing 21st century professional capacities.

Future Scenarios of Professional Learning Community in Singapore schools

Given the antithetical positions from which the two leading scholars of PLC talk about the construct, what are the possible unintended consequences that may emerge from this hybridization effort? One of the prevalent outcomes of hybridization efforts has been delineated in this paper. Inevitably, one version tends to overshadow the other. In the case of the AST communications to participating Singapore schools, it was the DuFour model that took the front stage. Schools, confused by what is expected of them, may interpret the notion at will and practice PLCs in ways that defies the rationale of calling the initiative a professional learning community. Secondly, schools may focus on one dimension of the model. DuFour subscribers may see PLC as a worthy cause to forge the strong leadership required for raising teaching standards, and the yardstick for “success” is qualified by student grades. Fullan supporters may feel alienated, and their decision to opt out of the initiative may deny themselves and their schools from the opportunity to learn from each other. Thirdly, schools may successfully carry out hybridization efforts. Teachers in these schools may express strong satisfaction in their PLC learning journey, citing superb school conditions (e.g. shared and supported leadership; and shared school culture) and effective professional development (e.g. collaborative learning; reflective dialogue; and student learning outcome).
The second paradox stems from the divergence between the manifest approach of the PLC implementation and the conceptualization of the initiative. While the latter tends to overshadow the hybrid model by focusing too much of the attention on DuFour, the former adopts an implementation style that shows some overlap with Fullan. Given the periodic rotation of appointment holders at the AST, the implementation is expected to evolve with the worldviews of those helming the project. Insofar as stakeholders (e.g. research collaborators, schools, teachers) are engaged in the constant negotiation with the AST vanguard on the direction of this PLC initiative, there remains the potential for a PLC model built upon all stakeholders as joint-agents.

The third paradox is perhaps a common experience of agencies aspiring to adapt PLC to national contexts distinctive from the ones where the notion was originally conceived. Should the introduction of PLC to the Singapore landscape stay authentic to how it is being propounded by international scholars, or should the local context be prioritized? As a postcolonial nation-state, Singapore policies are much open to external influences. Yet, characteristic of postcolonial nation-states, this importation is also tempered by a constant struggle for the maintenance of an independent and authentically Singaporean identity. That being said, the justification of the selective appropriation of concepts for the sake of cultural authenticity also runs the risk of producing ineffective learning. If ground-initiated change is often dismissed as culturally unauthentic by top leaders, for instance, then the potential of PLCs in creating stronger teacher professional networks would be significantly reduced. A balance needs to be maintained between the importance of cultural authenticity and the potential for reform.

Adoption of the DuFour-Fullan Model in Singapore Schools

Based on our recent survey and observation study of the PLC program at Singapore schools this year, the salience of the DuFour appears affirmed. Although most of the 96 schools in the survey reported the presence of conducive conditions for professional learning communities (i.e. shared values and vision, shared and supported school leadership, and reflective dialogue), these factors were much less salient in comparison to the self-reports on the engagement in aspects such as the focus on student learning and outcomes, and collaborative learning. Observations performed in eight schools further illuminated the gap in school subscription to the tenets of the Fullan model. Short of one school where school leadership and culture played a visible role in its professional learning community, teacher conversations in
the others were abuzz on the importance of student learning and related administrative matters. Responsiveness to considerations on systemness and school leadership was much less apparent in comparison. The possible exception is probably deep pedagogy, which Fullan espouses. It may be interesting to examine in detail - as the study progresses - the complementariness of the hybrid model in school professional learning communities. We remain hopeful of the proliferation of a deep pedagogy committed to student learning and outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

In this search for a theory of PLC that is contextualized in the Singapore experience, we found the conceptualization of the construct to be inextricable from the history of how national-level reform has been institutionalized. A principle of hybridization is adopted in the Singapore PLC initiative, where the conceptual model is mooted within the boardroom of a state-linked agency, the AST. The inclination of optimizing reforms through state orchestration of reform implementations, tempered with the hybridization of diverse, and even paradoxical conceptual elements, characterizes the Singaporean policy leitmotif. As with most hybridization attempts, some traits may emerge more dominantly than others. In the case of the “PLC model for Singapore schools”, the DuFour model tends to stand out.

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