

# Professional Learning Communities in Peninsular Malaysia: Comparing Day Secondary School and National Religious Secondary School

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## Abstract

The main aim of the study was to examine and compare the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in Day Secondary School (DSS) and National Religious Secondary School (NRSS) in Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 350 teachers from DSS and 371 from NRSS completed the survey with usable data. The results revealed that, i) both DSS and NRSS achieved the level of *Quite Good* in PLCs, its dimensions as well as its sub-dimensions; ii) NRSS achieved a higher mean score than DSS in PLCs, Organizational Factor as well as Non-organizational Factor and the differences were significant; iii) both DSS and NRSS achieved a higher mean score in Organization Factor than Non-Organizational Factor; iv) among all the sub-dimensions of PLCs, both DSS and NRSS achieved the highest mean score in *Shared Norms and Vision*; v) among all the sub-dimensions of PLCs, DSS achieved the lowest mean score in *External Support System* whereas NRSS achieved the lowest mean score in *Structural Support*. This study contributes to the field of learning organization and provides practical insights for educational practitioners and researchers in advancing a more comprehensive analysis in exploring PLCs towards continuous and sustained school improvement.

**Keywords:** Professional Learning Communities, Shared Norms And Vision, Principal's Commitment And Support; Structural Support, Colleague Understanding And Trust, Collaboration, Reflective Dialogue, Collective Inquiry, External Support System

## Introduction

Substantial research has consistently documented that teacher is the single most influential school-based factor on student performance (Jensen, 2012; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2007; Wang, 2015). As student achievement links significantly to teacher capacity for promoting student learning, teacher quality is central to the effectiveness of any education system. In response, there has been an increased focus on teacher professional development across different education systems specifically in enhancing teacher capacity with new competencies that are aligned with new learning standards and planned educational goals. Although approaches that can be feasibly applied for supporting

teacher professional development effectively have not yet been explicitly established, the current paradigm shift in teacher professional development is moving from the acquisition of knowledge and skills to collectively constructing knowledge in teaching and learning that can create profound impact on teachers' teaching and learning capacities (Hairon, 2016; Tai & Omar, 2019).

Traditionally, teachers are offered with time-limited, short-term, one-off, de-contextualized or off-site mode of professional development programmes that have been found lack of relevancy and disconnect from teachers' previous learning (Keay, Carse & Jess, 2019). This type of dominant approach of teacher professional learning not only in a linear and top-down sense, it also does not provide sufficient follow-up and opportunities for the implementation of the new learning gained (Desimone, 2009; Keay et al., 2019). As these 'quick fix' professional development programs do not focus on the individual needs of the teachers and are not constructive in ensuring effective teachers professional learning, certainly it is difficult to lead to any long-term change in practice of the teachers in the classrooms. Consequently, this will lead to the ineffectiveness of the teachers in teaching and learning that ultimately contributes to students' poor performance and achievement.

With the growing needs for accountability and educational excellence, the most effective approaches for teacher professional learning remain complex and dynamic. Instead of the traditional approaches mentioned above, it is time to focus on teacher professional learning that is situated, participative, non-linear, practice-based, inquiry oriented, emergent, transformative, recursive and long term. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been found one of the most effective approaches that possess the above characteristics (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Olivier & Hipp, 2016; Qiao, Yu, Zhang, 2018; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Indeed PLCs have been explored intensively by researchers and practitioners and are viewed as the "best hope for school reform" as it hold considerable promise for teacher learning, individually and collectively (Harris, 2010; Pyhalto, Soini & Pietarinena, 2011). It acts as a lever that supports school-wide capacity for promoting student learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman, Olivier, Wang, Chen, Hairon, & Pang, 2016; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

While school reforms have targeted the improvement of learning outcomes of all students and their holistic development across the world, and research demonstrating a positive relationship between PLCs and the improvement in teachers' practice and student achievement (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008), to create and develop a peer-led culture of PLCs is one of the important shifts of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 that has been launched in the year 2013 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). It is one of the pathways to achieve the objectives of the "Transform Teaching into the Profession of Choice" set out in the Blueprint (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Given the importance to add to the body of literature on PLCs, the purpose of the study was to examine the implementation of PLCs in the Peninsular Malaysian secondary schools. In comparison with other studies on PLCs, this study made a comparison between two types of secondary schools in Malaysia, the Day Secondary School (DSS) and the National Religious Secondary School (NRSS) so as to capture a better picture of the issue. The contextualized and timely nature of the study would provide information that can guide practices especially to address context specificity in enhancing PLCs practices in DSS and NRSS in the midst of the implementation of the Blueprint.

### Professional Learning Communities

PLCs have grown in importance and gained increasing attention in western educational settings since the 1990s as it is not only perceived as an effective strategy to improve teacher learning, competency and practice leading to better student outcomes, but also a pivotal staff development approach that contributes to whole-school improvement and overall effectiveness (Chen, Lee, Lin & Zhang, 2016; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Qiao et al., 2018). As the importance of PLCs has gained attention worldwide, PLCs have given way to countless definitions and models. Though the conceptualization of PLCs may differ, there is a growing consensus that PLCs are viewed as trusting communities in which teachers engage in learning together by constructing knowledge and meaning collectively and collaboratively that foster a culture which enhances teaching and learning for all (Huffman et al., 2016).

However, not all forms of PLCs make significant impact on teaching and learning that can create sustainable change (Trabona, Taylor, Klein, Munakate & Rahman, 2019). McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) differentiate PLCs as strong and weak whereby strong PLCs characterized by joint enterprise, shared repertoire of practice and mutual engagement and vice versa. According to Little (2003), the important elements or activities that support and sustain PLCs include: i) teachers engage together to identify problems of practice; ii) examine and explore the emergent problem collaboratively to seek for new solutions; iii) effective discussion and ongoing cycles of inquiry around artifacts of classroom practice; iv) make well-informed instructional decisions and institutionalize best practices of teacher learning and practice. Succinctly, the most significant features of these learning communities are that they are focused on student learning, self-sustaining and with the foundation of a culture of trust and collaboration. This form of PLCs not only gives teachers a sense of ownership and responsibility but also broaden teachers' educational horizons.

Hipp and Huffman (2010), on the other hand, summarize four important common elements that provide strong foundation for effective PLCs: i) establishment of common goals and values; ii) shared leadership; iii) a reduction in teacher isolation; and iv) a culture of teacher collaboration on professional practice and student outcomes. In recognizing the importance of considering viewpoints of multiple global systems, based on five educational systems, the Global Professional Learning Community Network (GloPLCNet) identified six major factors that promote or hinder the PLCs process: i) organizational structure, policies and procedures; ii) leadership; iii) professionalism; iv) learning capacity; v) sense of community; and vi) external factors such as stakeholders, cultural and historical context (Huffman et al., 2016). This enables educators and researchers to examine PLCs from a global perspective that fosters a collaborative international understanding.

More recently, teacher leadership, a notion that has seen a rapid growth in interest is viewed as an important facet of PLCs. According to Lin, Lee and Riordan (2018), teacher leadership is at the core of building PLCs as it is a natural outgrowth of teachers' collaboration across different layers and boundaries within school. They believe that if teachers are provided with more opportunities to involve and engage in PLCs practices, the higher the possibility that teachers are able to explore their own leadership and as a result teacher leaders will potentially emerge. Importantly, this type of collaboration not only facilitates teacher leadership but in turn will enhance and sustain the effectiveness of PLCs (Nappi, 2014); teacher leaders have the potential to influence their colleagues' instructional practices especially in helping them to move out from the isolation of the classroom and engage in authentic discussion around practice where they can construct meaningful knowledge to transform teaching and learning (Trabona et al., 2019). Particularly, they help to move the

learning culture of the school from a solely individual to a social process, thus strengthening instructional improvement and school reform.

### **The Practice of PLCs and the Contextual Factors**

Empirical research evidence reveals that PLCs practices are found embedded in cultural and organizational contexts (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012; Koffeman and Snoek, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2016; Pang, Wang & Leung, 2016; Zhang & Pang, 2016). Having said that, PLCs enacted differently in diversified contexts and developed variably with distinct cultural, social and institutional factors. For example, in examining the development of PLCs in schools located in two Chinese cities, namely, Shanghai and Mianyang that located in the East and the Southwest of China respectively, Zhang and Pang (2016) found that sampled schools in Mianyang had more PLCs practices than those in Shanghai. Indeed, both cities have significant differences in terms of economic, education, social and cultural development. For example, as Shanghai has a very high position on the aspiration ladder in the whole country in terms of accountability policies, it is believed that the accountability framework for schools in Shanghai is much stronger than in Mianyang. Therefore, generally the school principals and teachers in Shanghai face more pressure in comparison with those in Mianyang. It is believed that such disparity has profound impact on the PLCs development in schools.

While investigating the implementation of PLCs in Singapore, Haiaron and Dimmock (2012) reveal that the hierarchical education system in Singapore and its strong social culture characterized by strong central power and respect for authority impact heavily the formation of PLCs in schools. These institutional and cultural settings are very different from Western countries but are salient features that shape and impact the practices of PLCs in Singaporean schools. In a similar vein, Timperley (2008) emphasizes that the context whereby PLCs are located should be taken into account while examining any implementation of PLCs as it is largely influenced by the concerned societal factors in the situated community. In an effort to investigate the educational reforms and the practices of PLCs in Hong Kong, Pang et al (2016) also found that PLCs evidenced in Hong Kong schools appeared to have some distinct features in comparison with other school system due to the organizational, societal and cultural factors within the Hong Kong context that greatly influenced by the traditional Chinese collectivism.

Despite the societal and cultural factors, contextual factors at the regional level may have great influence on the development and practice of PLCs in schools. According to Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas (2006), district policies, school location, student backgrounds, resource accessibility, school infrastructures and the attitude of the local community toward schooling are among those contextual factors that have impacts on the effectiveness and sustainability of PLCs in schools. Consistent with the view above, Cowan, Joyner and Beck (2012) reveal that as the district education departments have become increasingly accountable for student learning, the district policies about funding, providing professional support and guidance are crucial in the realization of powerful PLCs in schools. Besides, Olivier and Huffman (2016) highlight that as the PLCs process becomes embedded within schools, the support from the district department has great impact on the extent how schools are able to re-culture and sustain highly effective PLCs. In summary, the aforementioned examples greatly support Wenger's (1998) theory of PLCs' context specificity.

### Methodology Sample

The Day Secondary School (DSS) and the National Religious Secondary School (NRSS) in Peninsular Malaysia were the two types of secondary school involved in the study. There were 13 states/federal territories in Peninsular Malaysia. For each state/federal territory, there were one to three NRSS were chosen for the study as there was less than three NRSS in some states/ federal territory. For comparison purpose, the number of DSS involved in the study was same as the number of NRSS chosen for the study. As shown in Table 1, there were 30 DSS and NRSS involved in the study respectively, giving a total of 60 schools (30 x 2) engaged in the research. In each school, 15 teachers were chosen randomly as respondents. Simply put, there were 450 teachers (30 x 15) of DSS and NRSS involved in the survey respectively or a total of 900 respondents engaged in the study.

Table 1

*Total number of schools and respondents involved in the survey based on each state/federal territory*

State/Federal Territory	Day Secondary School		National Religious Secondary School	
	Number of schools involved	Number of teachers involved	Number of schools involved	Number of teachers involved
Perlis	2	30	2	30
Kedah	3	45	3	45
Penang	2	30	2	30
Perak	3	45	3	45
Selangor	3	45	3	45
Negeri Sembilan	2	30	2	30
Melaka	2	30	2	30
Johor	3	45	3	45
Kelantan	3	45	3	45
Terengganu	3	45	3	45
Pahang	2	30	2	30
Kuala Lumpur	1	15	1	15
Putrajaya	1	15	1	15
Total	30	450	30	450

### Survey Instrument

The Professional Learning Communities Scale (PLCS) developed by Tai, Omar and Ghouri (2018) was employed to examine PLCs in DSS and NRSS. The PLCS encompasses two main dimensions i.e. Organizational Factor and Non-organizational Factor. Organizational Factor consists of four sub-dimensions namely, (a) Shared Norms and Vision; (b) Principal's Commitment and Support; (c) Structural Support; and (d) Collegial Understanding and Trust. Non-organizational Factor also encompasses four sub-dimensions namely, (a) Collaborative Learning; (b) Reflective Dialogue; (c) Collective Inquiry; and (d) External Support System (Tai et al., 2018).

The PLCS consists of 63 items. It held convergent validity as the Squared Multiple Correlations (SMC) all exceeded 0.5. (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010); the Average

Extracted Value (AVE) all above the recommended acceptance level of 50% (Fornell & Larker, 1981); and the Composite Reliability Index (CRI) surpassed the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010). Besides, it also held the evidence for discriminant validity as the AVEs of the factors were exceeded 0.50 the rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2011) and the CRI exceeded 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010).

The PLCS is a six-point Likert-type scale with the responses from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. There were two major parts in the questionnaire; Part I consisted of demographic information such as gender, age, race, highest education level, years in present job and type of school; and Part II contained scale items of PLCs. To interpret the data adequately, the level of PLCs was evaluated based on two indicators i.e. frequency of the performance and performance rating as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Raw Scores of PLCs and Its level and indicators*

Raw Scores	Level of PLCs	Indicators	
		Frequency of the Performance	Performance Rating
5.51 - 6.00	Very good	Almost all of the time	Very satisfactory
5.01 – 5.50	Good	Often	Satisfactory
4.01 - 5.00	Quite good	Quite Often	Quite satisfactory
3.01 - 4.00	Fair	Sometimes	Average
2.01 - 3.00	Quite poor	Quite Rarely	Quite Dissatisfactory
1.51 – 2.00	Poor	Rarely	Dissatisfactory
1.00 – 1.50	Very poor	Almost Never	Very Dissatisfactory

### Data Analysis

Altogether there were 900 sets of questionnaires sent out via post to all the chosen respondents in 30 DSS and NRSS respectively in Peninsular Malaysia. Eventually there were 372 sets from DSS and 383 sets from NRSS or a total of 755 set questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 83.88%. There were thirty-four sets of questionnaires excluded for further analysis as there were unaccepted technical errors. In other words, a total of 721 sets of questionnaires were included for the final analysis i.e. 350 sets from DSS and 371 from NRSS. For data analysis purpose, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to obtain mean scores and percentages. Additionally, the *t*-test was employed to test the significance of the differences between the concerned variables based on the significance level of .05.

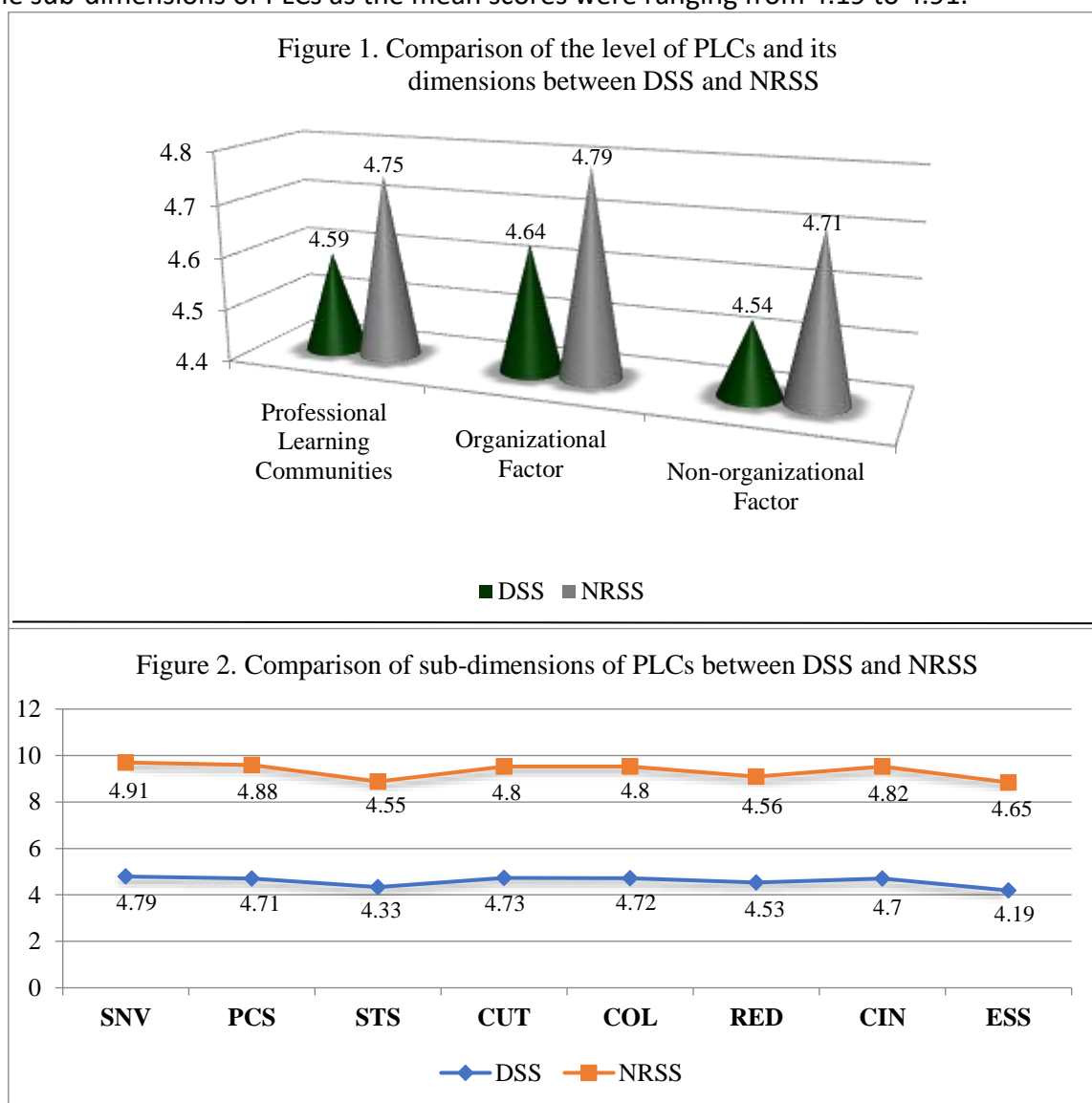
### Demographic Characteristics

Among all the respondents completing the questionnaires, female (74.06%;  $N=534$ ) were more than male (25.94%;  $N=187$ ). There were 43.83% ( $N=316$ ) in the age group of 31 to 40 years, 28.43% ( $N=205$ ) of the ages of 41 to 50 years, 16.92% ( $N=122$ ) 51 to 60 years and 10.82% ( $N=78$ ) 21 to 30 years. There were 92.93% of the respondents had a Bachelor's degree ( $N=670$ ). Only 6.52% respondents with a Master's degree ( $N=47$ ) and .57% of the respondents had a Ph.D. degree ( $N=4$ ). Additionally, there were 26.21% ( $N=189$ ) of the respondents had worked between six to ten years, 21.36% ( $N=154$ ) had worked more than 20 years, 19.97% ( $N=144$ ) 11 to 15 years, 16.23% ( $N=117$ ) 16 to 20 years and 16.23% had worked one to five years. A total of 51.46% ( $N=371$ ) of the respondents were from NRSS and 48.54% ( $N=350$ ) were from DSS.



### Findings

As a whole, based on the raw scores and the levels of PLCs suggested in Table 2, the DSS and NRSS achieved a level of *Quite Good* for PLCs as the mean score was 4.59 and 4.75 (Figure 1) respectively. Likewise, in terms of dimensions, as the mean scores were fell within the range of 4.01 to 5.00, both DSS and NRSS also achieved a level of *Quite Good* for Organizational Factor with the mean score of 4.64 and 4.79 (Figure 1) respectively; Non-organizational Factor with the mean score of 4.54 and 4.71 (Figure 1) respectively. Besides, in terms of sub-dimensions of PLCs, as shown in Figure 2, both DSS and NRSS were rated as *Quite Good* in all the sub-dimensions of PLCs as the mean scores were ranging from 4.19 to 4.91.



Note. SNV=Shared Norms and Vision; PCS=Principal's Commitment and Support; STS=Structural Support; CUT=Colleague Understanding and Trust; COL=Collaboration; RED=Reflective Dialogue; CIN=Collective Inquiry; ESS=External Support System; DSS=Day Secondary School; NRSS=National Religious Secondary School

In comparison between DSS and NRSS, as shown in Table 3, there was a difference of .16 between the two mean scores of PLCs and the difference was significant;  $t=-4.522$ ,  $df=719$ ,  $p<.05$ . There was also a significant difference between the mean score of Organizational

Factor for DSS and NRSS,  $t=-3.627$ ,  $df=719$ ,  $p<.05$ ; and Non-organizational Factor,  $t=-4.273$ ,  $df=719$ ,  $p<.05$ . In short, NRSS had practised PLCs more often and satisfactory than DSS.

While examining closely, the DSS and NRSS also achieved a higher mean score in Organizational Factor ( $M=4.64$  [DSS];  $M=4.79$  [NRSS]) than Non-organizational Factor ( $M=4.54$  [DSS];  $M=4.71$  [NRSS]) (Figure 1) respectively. A close examination by all the sub-dimensions, as shown in Figure 2, both DSS and NRSS also achieved the highest mean score in Shared Norms and Vision ( $M=4.79$  [DSS];  $M=4.91$  [NRSS]). However, DSS achieved the lowest mean score in External Support System ( $M=4.19$ ) whereas NRSS achieved the lowest mean score in Structural Support ( $M=4.55$ ).

Table 3

*Independent sample t-Test for differences among dimensions of PLCs between DSS and NRSS*

PLCs and its dimension/ Sub-dimension	Variance	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Professional Learning Communities	Equal variances assumed	35.610	.000	-4.522	719	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.475	612.628	.000
Organizational Factor	Equal variances assumed	.569	.451	-3.627	719	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.619	706.738	.000
Non-organizational Factor	Equal variances assumed	23.239	.000	-4.273	719	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.238	644.356	.000

In summary, the findings were

- i) Both DSS and NRSS achieved the level of *Quite Good* in PLCs, its dimensions as well as its sub-dimensions;
- ii) NRSS achieved a higher mean score than DSS in PLCs, Organizational Factor as well as Non-organizational Factor and the differences were significant;
- iii) Both DSS and NRSS also achieved a higher mean score in Organization Factor than Non-Organizational Factor;
- iv) Among all the sub-dimensions of PLCs, both DSS and NRSS achieved the highest mean score in *Shared Norms and Vision*;
- v) Among all the sub-dimensions of PLCs, DSS achieved the lowest mean score in *External Support System* whereas NRSS achieved the lowest mean score in *Structural Support*

## Discussion

The central aim of the study was to explore the patterns of PLCs of DSS and NRSS in Peninsular Malaysia. Several important insights have been unveiled from the findings. First, both DSS and NRSS achieved the level of *Quite Good* in PLCs, its dimensions as well as its sub-dimensions. Based on the indicators set in this study (Table 2), this implied that both teachers of DSS and NRSS had practised PLCs quite often with quite satisfied performance. To a large extent, such level of practising PLCs in DSS and NRSS is yet to be improved if it is to be effective



in the process of transforming teaching and learning successfully in the school community. In fact, the Ministry of Education (MOE) started to implement PLCs in Malaysian schools since 2011 whereby it was functioned as part of the CPD strategy of the schools to strengthen teachers' professionalism (MOE, 2015). Further, in recognizing the importance of PLCs in sustaining school reforms, PLC was accredited in the Malaysian Education Development Blueprint 2013-2025 as one of the effective approaches to transform the school system through teachers' collaboration in enhancing quality teaching and learning practices (MOE, 2015). Therefore, it is important to identify the potential reasons of the above predicament i.e. DSS and NRSS only achieved the level of *Quite Good* in practising PLCs after so much efforts and time have been invested by the MOE to develop and to promote PLCs in schools.

Substantial research reveals that the practising of PLCs in schools is closely linked to teachers' collaborative interaction in learning (e.g. Chen et al., 2016; Hairon, 2016; Huffman et al., 2016; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer & Kyndt, 2017). Hence, it is important to understand the learning context if we want to understand teacher learning as learning is the product of the learner's interaction with his/her contexts. According to Roger (1988), mutual respect and genuine participatory exchange of experiences among learners are seen as two important contextual factors to build an effective learning relationship. If learners are impeded by expressing themselves or reflecting on their own experiences without fear of being judged, of rejection or of failure, it is difficult to establish effective learning relationship. Hargreaves and Elhawary (2019) point out that only by establishing a relationship that encourages learners to trust their own experience, learners will open themselves to building new ways of perceiving and acting in the learning process. Consequently, they will exchange ideas or experiences, get feedback from colleagues, develop and share new materials as well as give each other moral support that encourage the developing of practical wisdom and creativity in the journey of continuous learning.

Malaysia is implementing a centralized rather than a decentralized school system although most countries in the world have experienced the pitfalls of centralized education service provision. Conformity is essential within the hierarchy of authority and is one of the important characteristics of centralized school system. However, the tendency to conform to authority and the hierarchical relationships within schools may hinder the mutual respect and trust among teachers in the learning process. This kind of relationship usually does not encourage curiosity, initiative-taking and creativity within teachers in enhancing further self-learning and development that are crucial for the success of PLCs in schools (Hargreaves and Elhawary, 2019). As a result, PLCs will be impeded as this conservative and closed oriented learning culture does not encourage collaborative and agentic learning in the school community. This could explain why both DSS and NRSS only achieved the level of *Quite Good* in PLCs and its dimensions and sub-dimensions.

Another contextual factor for the slow implementation of PLCs might be the teachers' heavy workload. As learning is a mutual construct between two or more people, teachers need time to initiate discussion, sharing of ideas, giving feedbacks with other teachers. Existing literature reveals that high volume of lessons, lesson preparation, administration tasks and other extra duties of the teachers are factors hindering teachers in promoting PLCs in school (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012; Kim & Ju, 2012; Lee, 2011; Seo, 2011; Song & Choi, 2010; Zhang & Pang, 2016). Kim and Ju (2012) highlight that teachers experience high work pressure due to excessive administrative work usually not likely to devote themselves in PLCs. Zhang and Pang (2016) also argue that teachers in Shanghai who have heavy workloads were probably not willing to involve in PLCs in comparison with teachers from Southwest China

who have lesser workloads. The Malaysian teachers are preoccupied with reports and other paperwork too. To a large extent, this probably is another factor that may affect the attitudes of the teachers of DSS and NRSS toward the implementation of PLCs in school community.

Secondly, NRSS achieved a higher mean score than DSS in PLCs, Organizational Factor as well as Non-organizational Factor and the differences were significant. One contributing reason might be the different organizational culture of these two distinct secondary schools that shaped different levels of PLCs. As mentioned earlier, there is a consistent finding that PLCs practices are found embedded in cultural and organizational contexts (Chen et al., 2016; Koffeman and Snoek, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2016; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Pang et al., 2016; Zhang & Pang, 2016). Although DSS and NRSS are secondary schools in Malaysia, but there are different in many aspects. DSS is the most popular type of secondary school in Malaysia and contributes 85% of the secondary schools in the country. The admissions are not selective; students who had completed primary education and Primary School Evaluation Test are allowed to enrol to Form 1 in DSS. For NRSS, the admissions are based on the Primary School Evaluation Test or at least pass the Fardhu Ain Basic Test conducted in Standard 6. The ability to read al-Quran and write Jawi script is also the basic requirements to enrol in NRSS. There are only a total number of 58 NRSS in Malaysia (EMIS, Ministry of Education Malaysia).

In terms of curriculum, NRSS employs an Islamic-based curriculum which is totally different from DSS (Tai & Omar, 2016). Despite that Malay as the main medium of instruction and English is a compulsory subject in both DSS and NRSS, the students of NRSS need to learn Arabic language. They learn and practise Islamic culture through the teaching and learning of Arabic language, Jawi and Quranic skills as well as activities applying Islamic values. In addition to the normal core subjects as conducted in DSS, students of NRSS in lower secondary (Form 1 to Form 3) are required to take the subject of Islam Education; for Upper Secondary (Form 4 to Form 5), Al-Quran, Al-Sunnah and Islamic Syariah Education are compulsory subjects. The Form Three Assessment and the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination are required for the students of DSS and NRSS at the end of Form 3 and Form 5, respectively.

Based on the aforementioned characteristics, NRSS can be seen as possessing a very unique organizational culture in comparison with DSS because NRSS not only employs an overly Islamic-based curriculum, the daily routines and practices in NRSS are also manifested in an Islamic characteristic. As organizational culture is the set of beliefs, values, norms and work styles that share by the members of the organization, it impacts the expectations toward the individuals in the organization --- what the members should do or what kind of behaviors are most likely to produce favorable outcomes (Tai & Omar, 2016). Although all education systems are invariably underpinned by values but faith-based school system has their own particular expectations toward their teachers. More specific to this study, the expectation towards teachers in NRSS in terms of religiosity and ethics was comparatively high in achieving the mission of preparing the students who are well developed in mind, soul and spirit in comparison with DSS. Therefore, this should not come as a surprise that teachers in NRSS achieved a higher mean score than DSS in performing PLCs that hold considerable promise for promoting student learning and are seen as a panacea for school reform.

Thirdly, both DSS and NRSS also achieved a higher mean score in Organization Factor than Non-organizational Factor. The Organization Factor refers to the factors at the organizational level of how school leaders support the practice of PLCs in terms of *Shared Norms and Vision, Principal's Commitment and Support, Structural Support* and *Collegial Understanding and Trust*. The Non-organization Factor is defined as the factors about how teacher perform PLCs in terms of *Collaborative Learning, Reflective Dialogue* and *Collective*

*Inquiry* and how various stakeholders and the local community support PLCs through *External Support System*. Based on the results that both DSS and NRSS achieved a higher mean score in *Organizational Factor* than *Non-organizational Factor*, these implied that teachers of DSS and NRSS perceived that their school leaders were attentive and supportive in the process of developing and supporting PLCs than teachers themselves in promoting PLCs in school community.

It seems possible that there were few reasons contributed to the above phenomenon. On a positive note, as developing a peer-led culture of PLCs is one of the important approaches emphasized by the MOE in achieving the objectives of “Transform Teaching into the Profession of Choice” – the 4th shift set out in the Blueprint” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013), therefore, concerted efforts have been taken by the MOE to train the school principals systematically to develop and ensure the enhancement of PLCs practices in schools. As a result, school principals of DSS and NRSS were able to incorporate and sustain PLCs in schools through *Shared Norms and Vision, Principal’s Commitment and Support, Structural Support* and *Collegial Understanding and Trust*. However, while much emphasis has been given to the importance of principal leadership in developing and supporting PLCs in schools, teacher leadership that serves as the key tenet of PLCs may somewhat be neglected. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) and Hipp and Huffman (2010) highlight that it is not unusual as due attention has been given to the importance of principal leadership in promoting and supporting PLCs, the role of teacher leadership in supporting PLCs tends to be undermined. Therefore, this probably resulted in the low performance of the teachers in terms of *Collaborative Learning, Reflective Dialogue* and *Collective Inquiry* and how they gained the various stakeholders and the local community to support PLCs through *External Support System*.

Another potential reason might be the tensions experienced by teachers when participating or promoting PLCs in school community. Indeed PLCs are a complex form of learning that involved the engagement of the teachers collectively and collaboratively and such learning is regulated by the workplace’s cultural norms and practices as well as the personal features of the teachers (Billett, 2009; Vangrieken et al., 2017; Schaap et al. 2018). According to Billett (2009) and Vangrieken et al. (2017), the combinations of workplace affordances and certain personal features of teachers can easily cause feelings of conflict or frictions while teachers participating in PLCs activities. Workplace affordances are cultural (e.g. beliefs, values and ideas), structural (e.g. power, roles, relationship) or material (workplace environment, resources) conditions and the extent to which they are available or flexible; personal features are the characteristics of the teachers that can impact the way how they regulate their workplace affordances, such as their needs, motives and expectations for their own professional development as well as school improvement (Schaap et al., 2018). The failure of getting the alignment between these two factors can cause tensions that could affect the learning processes and hinder the implementation of PLCs and its learning outcomes.

A similar picture is also supported by a qualitative study conducted by Schaap et al (2018) in identifying the different types of tensions experienced by teachers while participating in PLCs. They emphasize that the context of working and learning in PLCs is a complex context that often causes feelings of tension. According to them, tensions are anxiety, stress or loss of self-efficacy caused by conflicting workplace affordances and personal features of teachers and can slow down the pace of promoting PLCs in school community. Indeed in the process of promoting PLCs, teachers need time and space for

*Collaborative Learning, Reflective Dialogue* and *Collective Inquiry*. However, if they experience emotionally intensive situations every day this will lead to the creation of tension in the workplace. For examples, highly involved with the development and learning of the students, heavy interactions with colleagues, parents or any other stakeholders can cause feelings of tension of the teachers.

According to Schaap et al (2018), tensions also arise when teachers experience a lack of resources in enhancing student learning; discrepancy between actual and required knowledge in implementing PLCs especially in connecting the PLCs with school development; conservative learning culture such as individually oriented learning culture in school community; and lack of involvement, interest or investment from other colleagues in promoting PLCs. Teachers of DSS and NRSS may encounter the above scenarios that caused contextual and personal nature of tensions and thus unable to perform well at the non-organizational level in promoting PLCs especially in *Collaborative Learning, Reflective Dialogue* and *Collective Inquiry* or to get various stakeholders' support through *External Support System*. To this end, more research is needed to be conducted to help the MOE to identify the complex interactions among the context and condition and the impact on PLCs especially to explicitly investigate tensions arise in the context of PLCs in school community.

Fourthly, among all the sub-dimensions of PLCs, both DSS and NRSS achieved the highest mean score in *Shared Norms and Vision*. *Shared Norms and Vision* refer to teachers being committed to the ultimate objectives, rules and norms on student accomplishment whereby this feeling of share vision has substantial benefits of a collaborative nature that impacts profoundly the implementation of PLCs in a school. Indeed this is the key for developing any effective PLCs in school community. According to Hipp and Huffman (2010), *Shared Norms and Vision* become critical for the staff to identify with school collective goals and based on the norms of the organization to build a culture of collegiality and collaboration that can move the organization to realize the change goals. Admittedly, if the vision aligns well with the initiatives taken by the staff members, it is easier to translate the vision into reality.

DSS and NRSS achieved the highest mean score in *Shared Norms and Vision* implied that the practice of sharing norms and vision among the teachers were encouraging. For examples, teachers of DSS and NRSS developed together the school vision; a range of strategies had been considered by the teachers in determining how to achieve the school vision; the teachers had a clear direction of how to turn school vision into reality; the school management used possible means to communicate the vision to create full understanding; the teachers were constantly engaged in decision making in alignment with the school vision; responsibilities were shared amongst the teachers to achieve the school vision; the teachers were actively involved in communication to continually reinforce the vision; and programmes implemented by teachers were aligned to the school's vision (Tai et al., 2018). This kind of initiatives probably will help the teachers of DSS and NRSS to achieve mutual objectives that create a culture open to learn and share, thus providing continuity and focus in enhancing student learning.

Fifthly, among all the sub-dimensions of PLCs, DSS achieved the lowest mean score in *External Support System* whereas NRSS achieved the lowest mean score in *Structural Support*. *External Support System* refers to improving outreach and collaboration with stakeholders including families, communities, district and state education departments, in the process of developing and promoting PLCs in schools (Tai et al., 2018). DSS achieved the lowest mean score in *External Support System* implied that they were not able to get sufficient support in

promoting the shared responsibility effectively among various stakeholders in maximizing the practice of PLCs in schools. For instances, the parents might not willing to cooperate with the school to take effective initiatives for intentional student improvement; probably the Parent-Teacher Association were passive promoters of the shared responsibility for student learning or the local communities unable or refused to provide financial support for the promoting of PLCs in schools (Tai et al., 2018).

However, while examining closely, it was found that the NRSS did not encounter this predicament badly as DSS because the *External Support System* of NRSS was ranked as the sixth among the all the eight mean scores of the sub-dimensions of PLCs (Figure 2). To a certain extent this can be explained by the fact that the stakeholders especially the parents and the local community of NRSS who were Muslims and practised the concept of Ummah may make a difference on this issue. The strength of social relation in the Islamic conception of society may lead to the unity of social behaviour among the parents and local community of NRSS in promoting school improvement. This phenomenon may not exist habitually among parents and local community of DSS that embrace different ideologies and religions. If this was the case, it again proved that the development of PLCs is embedded within the culture. In other words, the contextual factor has great impact in enhancing the development and the implementation of PLCs in school community.

*Structural Support* is defined as the extent to which the administrative system, procedures and policies support the development and enhancement of PLCs in terms of time arrangement, space, facilities, resources and funding. Research on PLCs has indicated that *Structural Support* was important for PLCs initiatives and evolvement (Olivier & Hipp, 2010; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Song & Choi, 2010). NRSS achieved the lowest mean score in *Structural Support* implied that the supportive conditions and infrastructures that are critical for the implementation of PLCs were unavailable sufficiently in NRSS.

For instances, time provided by the school management to facilitate collaborative work among teachers; multiple opportunities for collaboration across departments; school facilities for ongoing collaboration across levels of the organization; relevant resources to enhance instruction practices; expertise to increase teaching and learning effectiveness; appropriate ICT technology to facilitate teaching and learning; the communication systems that provide relevant information to all staff members and the budget that support collaboration (Tai et al., 2018). Despite the fact that school leaders of NRSS need to pay more attention and take relevant initiatives to improve the above predicament, concerted efforts from the MOE in improving school facilities and working conditions are equally important that probably will enhance the practice of PLCs in NRSS and ultimately its educational quality and student outcomes.

### **Limitations and Future Direction of the Study**

A few limitations of the study should be highlighted and discussed. First, the study is limited by its small sample size. Future research should be designed to address this limitation by taking a larger sample size; it is more likely to be representative of the original population and tends to be associated with a smaller margin of error as well as to increase the power of the study to draw conclusions. Besides, to gain a more comprehensive view and to avoid egocentric biases, it is suggested that the data can be collected not only from the teachers but the school principals and senior assistants as well. This initiative may help us to gain a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon and to enhance the ability to interpret the findings. Lastly, as the process of the development and the implementation of PLCs are



complicated, longitudinal studies may be particularly useful to help understand the complexity of the study; especially the interplay of the workplace affordances and the personal features of teachers in promoting PLCs that may create contextual and personal nature of tensions in the school community. Any future study to obtain the data through such approach would greatly advance our understanding of the phenomena under study.

### Conclusion

The different patterns of PLCs presented in this study between DSS and NRSS will expand our understanding about the development and the promoting of PLCs in Peninsular Malaysian secondary schools. As both DSS and NRSS achieved the level of *Quite Good* in PLCs, its dimensions as well as its sub-dimensions, this implies that there is room for improvement in the implementation of PLCs in DSS and NRSS. Much more efforts and appropriate strategies need to be adopted by the MOE as well as the school leaders in coping with challenges arising from the implementation of PLCs. Secondly, to successfully promote PLCs in schools, to understand the learning context of the teachers is of paramount importance. Contextual factors such as decentralized school system, organizational culture and workplace affordances are some key factors that impact profoundly the development and sustainability of PLCs and thus need more attention of the MOE especially while making refinements and alignments to the implementation of PLCs in near future.

Thirdly, we cannot underestimate the interplay between personal features of teachers and workplace affordances as it emerges as another critical factor that probably would create tensions among the teachers and ultimately impedes the implementation of PLCs. Fourthly, supportive condition either from internal or external is equally important for the development and the practice of PLCs in school community specifically in the process of promoting student learning. The failure of preparing teachers with supportive and conducive working environment will hinder the process of developing and sustaining PLCs within school community. In summary, this study contributes to the field of learning organization and provides practical insights for educational practitioners and researchers in advancing a more comprehensive analysis in exploring PLCs towards continuous and sustained school improvement. It also serves as an important step forward for PLCs studies that may help move the literature of PLCs to a more coherent theoretical perspective.

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