The Interplay of Professional Learning Communities on Teacher Empowerment of Public Secondary Teachers in IGACOS Division

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0624.1470

A B S T R A C T

Teacher empowerment is facilitated through the provision of opportunities, particularly through professional learning communities. However, these aspects have not been specifically investigated in the local context. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the extent of professional learning communities and teacher empowerment among public secondary teachers in the IGACOS Division. Additionally, it examined the relationship between these variables and the domains of professional learning communities that significantly contribute to teacher empowerment. Through probability sampling, 200 secondary teachers from public schools were selected as respondents. The descriptive-correlational survey method was employed, and data analysis involved Mean, Product-Moment correlation, and Regression Analysis. The results indicated extensive professional learning communities and teacher empowerment, with a significant relationship between the two variables. Based on these findings, it is recommended that higher officials in the Department of Education and school leaders identify strategies to empower teachers, emphasizing the importance of professional learning communities. It is evident that the collective effort of the entire school community is essential for achieving teacher empowerment.

Keywords: Professional learning communities, teacher empowerment, descriptive correlation, IGACOS Division, Philippines

Introduction

Teacher empowerment entails granting teachers the authority to participate in shaping school goals and policies based on their professional judgment. Through empowerment, teachers can recognize their strengths and weaknesses, fostering competence in their professional growth. It is essential to encourage, empower, and support teachers in various ways to enhance their qualifications and unleash their potential. Unfortunately, teacher empowerment has not received adequate attention.

In Turkey, school administrators often neglect to support teachers' professional development, enhance their self-efficacy, promote their autonomy, or involve them in managerial roles, which negatively impacts teacher empowerment. Similarly, in the US, the attrition rate varies by state, with teachers feeling less empowered in their school communities. For instance, California, Nevada, and Washington are experiencing severe shortages.

Teacher attrition is notably higher among new teachers and those serving high-poverty, high-need students. Attrition can be either involuntary, resulting from dismissals or school closures, or voluntary. Voluntary attrition may stem from family matters, dissatisfaction with salary and benefits, preferences regarding working locations, or dissatisfaction with working conditions. Teachers may opt to leave voluntarily due to a lack of professionalism, involvement in decision-making processes, collegiality, or administrative support.

 Meanwhile, Filipino educators face challenges in exerting authority within the Philippine educational context due to inadequate school conditions. Research has shown that teachers struggle to present course content effectively and lack diverse teaching techniques. They also lack professional development opportunities necessary to diversify their teaching methods and often feel unprepared to teach according to the set schedule. Moreover, the lack of resources and support means teachers have limited time to deliver the curriculum effectively (Magallanes et al., 2022). This finding is supported by Dizon et al. (2019), who also highlighted teachers' lack of preparedness for professional development.

In the IGACOS Division, the researcher noted that the absence of avenues for professional growth and promotion hinders teachers from feeling empowered. The low income provided often leads teachers to seek additional employment. Additionally, teachers are burdened with non-teaching responsibilities, which detracts from their ability to focus on classroom teaching. Given these circumstances, the researcher aimed to explore the implementation of professional learning communities and teacher empowerment in public primary schools within the IGACOS Division. The study also aimed to examine the relationship between these two variables.

The researcher was motivated to investigate these variables due to the limited research on professional learning communities and teacher empowerment. The study also sought to provide policymakers with insights to develop policies, programs, interventions, projects, and activities that could enhance teacher empowerment in public schools through professional learning communities.

The theoretical framework for this study was primarily based on Psychological Empowerment, which stems from Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. Conger and Kanungo (1988) further developed this concept, describing empowerment as a motivational process wherein individuals enhance their self-efficacy. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) expanded on this idea, proposing that empowerment is a multidimensional structure comprising four elements: meaning, self-determination, competence, and impact. They suggested that psychological empowerment energizes a person's behavior and intrinsically motivates them towards their work, leading to improved job performance.

Yildiz et al. (2017) highlighted that psychological empowerment fosters teacher autonomy, greater involvement in decision-making, a sense of control over their work, and trust in themselves and their organization. Generally, psychological empowerment includes teachers' feelings of mastery and motivational drive, correlating with positive attitudes, behaviors, and performance. It represents how teachers perceive their work and their role within the organization (Ambad & Bahron, 2012).

Psychological empowerment is seen as a tool to motivate teachers and enhance their teaching and research performance (Sotirofski, 2014). An empowered employee feels the freedom to make choices while fulfilling duties (Celik & Atik, 2020) and seeks to improve performance through proactive approaches (Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2013). In the educational context, teacher empowerment involves encouraging teachers to participate in decision-making, expanding their decision-making capabilities, fostering trust in their decision-making abilities, encouraging responsibility, and providing a sense of control over the process (Ahrari et al., 2021; Yildiz et al., 2017).

Additionally, Olivier and Huffman's (2016) theory emphasized five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning to enhance teaching and learning for both teachers and students. These dimensions include shared and supportive leadership, values, vision, collective learning, application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions. These dimensions are crucial for interpreting the results and findings of this study and can inform recommendations to enhance collaborative practices within Professional Learning Communities.

Professionally, the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process enables teachers to initiate and influence change in the workplace by sharing their content expertise and instructional strategies that enhance student learning (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). Similar to other professions, new teachers require years to refine their skills to become effective in their role (Mertler, 2018). However, veteran teachers do not automatically master their profession solely by spending years in the classroom. True experts, or "master teachers," are those who consistently and thoughtfully reflect on their actions, performance, and the outcomes of those actions (Mertler, 2018). The structured PLC process engages teachers in ongoing collaborative professional work, providing them with opportunities to express, explore, analyze, and reflect on their professional practices, ultimately leading to enhanced student achievement (Marzano et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice (CoPs) also supports the direction of this study. Wenger's (1998, 2000) theory focuses on learning as social participation, emphasizing involvement in negotiating and reifying joint problems or projects within social communities' practices. For individuals, learning entails engaging in the community's practices, while for the community, learning involves refining its practices and self-maintenance. To support learning, organizations must sustain interconnected CoPs that make the organization effective.

Participation in a social learning community requires three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger, 2000). Engagement involves doing things together and producing artifacts, shaping members' experiences of their identity. In the context of the study, teachers improve their instructional practices by engaging collaboratively with their colleagues. Teachers' participation in PLCs fosters social interactions among grade-level teams or colleagues and reduces teacher isolation (Mertler, 2018). Instructional leaders are responsible for providing collaborative planning times for PLC members each week (DuFour, 2016). Teachers are expected to use this time collectively to plan and pace instruction, identify struggling learners, plan intervention strategies, and identify students who have mastered content for extension activities (Mertler, 2018). The PLC process cultivates a culture in which teachers feel more empowered in their work, offering effective means for professional learning opportunities (Marzano et al., 2016).

Key concepts that facilitate the functioning of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) include teachers collaborating to understand the practices, policies, procedures, and beliefs that best support student learning, educators applying and implementing their learning, and using evidence of student learning to assess, modify, and celebrate their collective efforts to enhance student achievement (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). This knowledge can guide teachers' instruction, incorporating new ideas, best practices, and strategies to address their students' identified needs. PLCs offer opportunities to enhance teachers' professional skills and provide a platform for sharing and accessing a wealth of resources to improve teaching and learning (Dimmock, 2016).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach, specifically utilizing the descriptive correlational method. Quantitative research involves studying a specific group of people, known as a sample population, using scientific inquiry to examine questions about this population by relying on observed or measured data. Social scientists, including communication researchers, use quantitative research to observe phenomena affecting individuals and generate knowledge about the social world. A descriptive correlational study focuses on describing relationships between variables without establishing a causal relationship (Allen, 2017). This study was considered quantitative because it relied on numerical data for analysis and interpretation. It was descriptive in nature because its aim was to assess the extent of professional learning communities and teacher empowerment. Furthermore, it was correlational as it sought to measure the relationship between professional learning communities and teacher empowerment among public secondary teachers in the IGACOS Division.

Research Respondents

This study included 200 public secondary teachers from the Division of IGACOS. It was determined that 200 samples were adequate for conducting Pearson Correlation analysis (Memon et al., 2020), thus satisfying the study's requirements. The inclusion criteria specified that secondary teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience were selected, as this tenure in the public school system was deemed sufficient for them to assess professional learning communities and teacher empowerment. Participants who felt uncomfortable or uneasy while completing the survey questionnaire were given the option to withdraw from the study voluntarily. Their decision to withdraw was respected, and they were not pressured to participate. Ensuring the welfare of the respondents was a top priority in conducting this study.

Research Instruments

As to the form of gathering data, this study utilized an adapted survey questionnaire. The questionnaire that was employed in this undertaking was divided into two sets. The first set was focusing on the professional learning communities while the second set was about the teacher empowerment of public secondary teachers.

The professional learning communities questionnaire was adapted from Stamper (2015). The instrument consists of 52 items. It has the following indicators, namely: shared and supportive leadership (1-11), shared values and vision (1-9), collective learning and the application of learning (1-10), shared personal practice (1-7), and supportive conditions (1-15). The questionnaire was subjected to a pilot testing having a result of .75 suggesting that the items have relatively *high* internal consistency.

The questionnaire on teacher empowerment was adapted from Short and Rinehart (1992). It is a 38-item research tool emphasizing the following dimensions: decision-making (1-10), professional growth (11-16), status (17-22), self-efficacy (23-28), autonomy (29-32), and impact (33-38). The questionnaire was subjected to a pilot testing having a result of .73 suggesting that the items have relatively *high* internal consistency.

Table

Table 1

Summary on the Extent of Professional Learning Communities

No	Indicators	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1	Shared and Supportive Leadership	3.50	Extensive
2	Shared Values and Vision	4.05	Extensive
3	Collective Learning and Application	4.36	Very Extensive
4	Shared Personal Practice	4.28	Very Extensive
5	Supportive Conditions	4.34	Very Extensive
Overall		**4.11**	**Extensive**

Table 1 provides the summary on the extent of professional learning communities. It is exhibited that the overall mean of professional learning communities is 4.11, which is in an extensive level. This means that professional learning communities is oftentimes evident.

Data show that all five (5) indicators revealed a varying result ranging from extensive to very extensive result. As arranged chronologically, collective learning and application has the highest mean score (4.36). This is followed by supportive conditions (4.34), shared personal practices (4.28), shared values and vision (4.05), and shared and supportive leadership (3.50).

The data regarding professional learning communities show a diverse range of results across five indicators, collectively providing a comprehensive view of their strengths and areas for improvement. While these communities excel in collective learning and creating supportive conditions, there is a need to enhance shared values, vision, and leadership. Improving these aspects can lead to more cohesive and effective learning communities, benefiting both professional development and student outcomes.

Miller (2020) supported the idea that educators can enhance student outcomes through collaboration in professional learning communities (PLCs), engaging in repeated cycles of group inquiry and action research. PLCs are a recognized and effective strategy for fostering teacher cooperation, which in turn improves student achievement. Teachers must possess the skills to motivate students to engage in higher-order thinking, and PLCs can help prepare them for this shift.

Similarly, Kramer (2019) and DuFour et al. (2016) defined a PLC as a group of teachers within a school or district who collaborate to enhance student and adult learning. These multidisciplinary teams share a common goal of promoting learning for all. Additionally, Ann-Christine and Ulf (2017) argue that PLCs should involve students in the teaching and learning process to enable teachers to reflect effectively.

Lahtero et al. (2019) noted that previous educational studies in Finland have focused on various aspects of PLCs, such as leadership, teacher learning, relationships, and the working environment. Malinen and Palmu (2017) suggest that co-teaching can enhance work-integrated learning and mutual support among teachers, improving teaching abilities and promoting teacher well-being.

Table 2

Summary on the Extent of Teacher Empowerment

No	Indicators	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
1	Decision Making	3.39	Moderately Extensive
2	Professional Growth	4.32	Very Extensive
3	Status	4.31	Very Extensive
4	Self-Efficacy	4.39	Very Extensive
5	Autonomy	3.33	Moderately Extensive
6	Impact	4.25	Very Extensive
Overall		**4.00**	**Extensive**

Table 2 provides the summary on the extent of teacher empowerment. It is exhibited that the overall mean of teacher empowerment is 4.00, which is in an extensive level. This means that teacher empowerment is oftentimes evident.

Data show that all six (6) indicators revealed a varying result ranging from moderately extensive to very extensive level. As arranged chronologically, self-efficacy has the highest mean score (4.39). This is followed by professional growth (4.32), status (4.31), impact (4.25), decision making (3.39), and autonomy (3.33).

The data, reflecting varying results across all six indicators from moderately extensive to very extensive levels, underscores the multifaceted nature of teacher empowerment. These results highlight the importance of fostering a supportive and collaborative environment that enhances teachers' self-belief, growth, and professional status. By nurturing teacher empowerment in these areas, a culture of continuous improvement, collaboration, and shared decision-making can be cultivated, leading to increased teacher job satisfaction, improved student learning outcomes, and overall school success.

The findings of this study support the idea put forth by Yin et al. (2013) that teachers' sense of empowerment significantly impacts student achievement and other self-perceptions, such as job satisfaction, professional commitment, and perceived reform outcomes. Teacher empowerment may vary based on teacher characteristics and the specific school context, with teachers' sense of efficacy and the establishment of trust within the school community being identified as important factors.

In the realm of school improvement, Lee et al. (2011) suggested that empowering teachers to assume leadership roles can benefit the school reform process. Schools that embrace shared decision-making make it easier for principals to initiate reform efforts. Furthermore, teachers' professional growth, a component of teacher empowerment, can enhance their perception of the outcomes of reform efforts. Ganiban et al. (2019) noted that empowered employees, including teachers, are influenced by their leaders, often emulating their behaviors and internalizing their responsibilities. Therefore, it is the role of school principals to empower teachers within education systems (Vrhovnik et al., 2018).

As evident from the results, strategies and tactics for empowerment are essential for creating a positive organizational identity, which is crucial for motivating employees. Kiral (2015) emphasizes that principals should be adept at employing various empowerment strategies to maximize their employees' potential, motivate them, and encourage their engagement in their work. Consequently, principals should embody empowering leadership and strategically employ empowerment techniques.

Table 3

Significance of the Relationship Between Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Empowerment

Professional Learning Communities	Dependent Variable	r-value	p- value	Decision on Ho
Shared and Supportive Leadership		0.508	0.000	Rejected
Shared Values and Vision		0.513	0.000	Rejected

Collective Learning and Application		0.525	0.000	Rejected
Shared Personal Practice	**Teacher Empowerment**	0.515	0.000	Rejected
Supportive Conditions		0.523	0.000	Rejected
Overall		**0.517***	**0.000**	**Rejected**

*Significant at 0.05 significance level.

Presented in Table 3 are the data on the significance of the relationship between professional learning communities and teacher empowerment. Reflected in the hypothesis, the relationship was tested at 0.05 level of significance. The overall r-value of .402 with a p-value of <0.05 signified the rejection of the null hypothesis. It means that there is a significant relationship between professional learning communities and teacher empowerment. This shows that professional learning communities are correlated with teacher empowerment.

Doing a pairwise correlation among the measures of both variables, it can be gleaned that shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions revealed computed r-values of 0.508, 0.513, 0.525, 0.515, and 0.523 respectively with p-values which are less than 0.05 in the level of significance. This implies that as shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions increases, the teacher empowerment also increases.

The findings are consistent with Wislon's (2016) study, which demonstrates that professional learning communities (PLCs) enable teacher leadership by facilitating collaboration on professional tasks, analysis of student data, and assessment of student learning. PLCs excel in harnessing collective efforts towards shared values, commitments, and actions, ultimately contributing to school improvement endeavors. Fundamentally, PLCs lie at the core of teaching and learning within educational institutions.

Various studies underscore the significance of professional learning communities in empowering teachers. Marzano et al. (2016) define PLCs as networks of collaborative teams comprised of teachers working together to enhance student learning. Collaboration is pivotal in fostering reflective practice, a crucial pathway to expertise development in education and other fields. Dimmock (2016) notes that a key aspect of PLCs is the dedication of educators collaborating to address common barriers to student success. Furthermore, PLCs present a promising avenue for empowering teachers through practical research endeavors.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were offered:

The extent of professional learning communities of the public secondary schools implies that it is oftentimes evident. Specifically, collective learning and application, shared personal practices, and supportive conditions are perceived to be always evident while shared and supportive leadership and shared values and vision are oftentimes evident. Meanwhile, the extent teacher empowerment is oftentimes evident. In particular, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, and impact are always evident among teachers while decision making and autonomy are occasionally evident. Based on the findings, professional learning communities and teacher empowerment are related. This leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

Recommendations

The following suggestions were offered based on the conclusions of the study:

The higher officials in the Department of Education may craft effective policies, programs, projects, interventions and activities which promote the professional learning communities leading to teacher empowerment. They may create more initiatives that would further empower teachers by providing them varied forms of professional learning communities.

Meanwhile, school principals may find means in crafting different professional learning communities. They may also assess the capacities of their teachers prior to designation of responsibilities to them to ensure teacher empowerment. They may also ask their teachers of their needed professional development initiatives.

More so, teachers may take an effort to keep on upgrading themselves. They may attend various seminars, webinars, or any undertaking that would help empower them. Apparently, teachers may also consider the responsibilities or accountabilities given to them to further develop their craft and empower them.

Lastly, future researchers may explore relevant information about professional learning communities and teacher empowerment. They may consider using other research approaches such as qualitative research and mixed methods further explore the involved variables in this study.

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