Status of professional learning communities in developing countries: Case of Vietnam and Uganda

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

What is the status of professional learning communities in Vietnam and Uganda? Is there a significant difference between the teaching experience of secondary teachers and how they see the relevance of professional learning communities on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda? The forementioned questions were explored by collecting data from secondary school teachers (n=345) in Vietnam and Uganda through a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) were used to analyze the data. The findings depict that involvement of secondary school teachers in professional learning communities and the associated contribution on professional development is 'moderate' in Vietnam whilst, it is 'minimal' in Uganda. It was also established that significant difference exists between the teaching experience of secondary teachers and how they recognize the relevance of professional learning communities on professional development. The findings suggest that relevant educational policies and adequate funding ought to be considered in order to make professional learning communities vibrant in both Vietnam and Uganda. This is deemed key to enhance secondary school teacher competence which in turn could lead to higher students' learning outcome in Vietnam and Uganda respectively.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Developed countries have embraced professional learning community as one of the means to ensure teacher quality in their education systems. Countries (USA, UK, Japan) just to mention but a few have approved the idea of professional learning community as a contemporary way of meeting teachers' professional development needs. However, little is known about professional learning communities in developing countries, such as Vietnam and Uganda. Thus, due effort in the aforementioned developing countries ought to be undertaken so that they also adopt the idea of professional learning community as a contemporary form of teacher professional development. Moreover, teachers at all levels of education regardless of context face a huge challenge of remaining relevant in the era of knowledge explosion and pandemic situations e.g., coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This is based on the fact that COVID-19 has made educational institutions adjust to the "new normal" situation to ensure that there is continuous teaching and learning. Consequently, teachers are required to learn new ways of passing on knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to the learners, such as via online platforms, video devices and print materials.

Therefore, teachers must have very good collaboration and networking skills [1], so as to be able to learn how to effectively teach learners online as well as design and develop appropriate print materials for learners. One avenue for the teachers to remain relevant in education service provision in the era of pandemics like COVID-19 and knowledge explosion in the 21st century and beyond is through professional learning communities (PLCs). Besides, professional learning communities are expected to be communities of permanent research and improvement [2]. There is little empirical data regarding the status of professional learning communities in developing countries such as Vietnam and Uganda. This gap in the educational research literature needs to be addressed so as to inform educational policy, administration, management and leadership in educational institutions in the aforementioned countries. This study, therefore, set out to contribute to educational research literature by establishing the position of professional learning communities in developing countries using Vietnam and Uganda as a case. The study also examines whether significant difference exists between the teaching experiences of secondary teachers and how they perceive the relevance of professional learning community on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The professional learning community notion in education has roots from the learning organization concept as used in the business field [3]. It is widely accepted that professional learning community rotates around enhancing the process of teaching and learning [4]. According to Hord [2], the notion is all about teachers exploring ways how to better their performance. Professional learning community is an important professional development initiative [5]. This study espouses previous study [6] that from a Social Cognitive Theory stance, teachers may obtain rich knowledge applicable to their delivery practices and strategies by observing other teachers. In addition, Bennett [6] affirm that professional interaction among educators promotes sharing of information and ideas leading to effective teaching and learning. For over two decades, schools in the United States use professional learning community to enhance teacher competence with expectation of improving student achievement outcomes [7].

Professional learning community is comprehended as "an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all learners' learning" [8]. In addition, Atta [9] avers that team work, collaboration and networking enable teachers to improve their instructional performance. Previous researcher [10] state that professional learning community provides professional development opportunity to teachers to keep abreast with contemporary teaching and learning processes. The foregoing observation is in line with study findings [11] which indicate that professional learning community positively influence teacher practice.

Professional learning community is important to change teacher beliefs and practices [12]. Professional learning community in the education context is all about team work and deliberate effort to learn from one another so as to improve teacher performance [13]. Graham [14] declares that "school leaders should require teachers to establish individual and organizational commitment to a common mission and goals centered around ensuring student learning; collaborate regularly on curricular, instructional, and organizational decisions; and collect and analyze organizational data and results." Professional learning communities promote teacher quality and student learning [15].

According to previous study [16], it is indicated that due to increased need for accountability, many schools especially in the more developed countries have embraced professional learning communities to enhance the competence of teachers so as to realize high student learning achievement. It is widely accepted that effective teacher professional development is key if we want to realize quality teaching and learning [17]. Put differently, sound professional learning aim at enhancing the fundamental traits of an ideal teacher. As such, enhances teachers' understanding of the content they teach and equips them with a range of strategies that enable their students to learn that content. Accordingly, professional learning communities aim at providing teachers with the skills to teach and assess for deep understanding and to develop students' metacognitive skills [18]. Besides, mutual interactions among teachers should be a basic tenant in professional learning communities as it leads to increased teacher learning [19].

Professional learning community must positively influence the professional learning and self-esteem of the teachers, school leaders and predominantly positively influence learner attainment [20]. It is vital to recognize that involvement in professional learning communities call for unwavering commitment from a teacher [20]. The awareness of a professional learning community is gaining prominence as an influential aspect in educational policy and practice. This is premised on the fact that schools should be professional learning communities if they want to produce desired results that meet the stakeholders' expectation [21]. Professional learning communities provide opportunities for group or collective learning [22]. Besides, it is fair to say that no individual teacher knows everything in a subject, as such: excellent teachers always have

great desire to learn from others. Teachers as group of professionals ought to make all possible effort to network and collaborate with their peers to improve their teaching performance [23], [24] and have collective initiative [25].

Professional learning communities are perceived as a vehicle for establishing collegial relationships and for building capacity for change within a school [26]. It is in line with Pirtle and Tobi [27] who advance that professional learning communities are perceived as effective when teachers adopt contemporary instructional methods, techniques and strategies. In South Africa, professional learning community is gaining wide acceptance as one of the viable means of improving teacher performance [28]. Similarly, Australian Council for Educational Research [29] espouses that "professional community is characterized by a distinctive set of values, challenges, working relationships and practices concerned with the ways teachers work together and do things differently from the traditional model where they often worked in isolation."

Besides, education institutions should accord continuous professional development opportunities to teachers in order to improve their performance [30]. Moreover, in this knowledge explosion era, schools ought to become learning organizations through establishing professional learning communities in the various fields of study [31]. Scholars [32] point out that school leaders are critical in providing instructional leadership. Consequently, school leaders should support existence of professional learning communities in schools. In summation, literature reviewed herein suggests that educational institutions in developing countries such as Vietnam and Uganda must seriously embrace the approach as a way of enhancing teachers' development. Besides, any effort geared at improving education systems in developing countries like Vietnam and Uganda should pay due attention to strategies aimed at enhancing the competence of teachers to deliver high quality knowledge, skills, values and orientations to the learners.

3.   RESEARCH METHOD
3.1. Research paradigm
The study was based on a positivist paradigm. The positivist paradigm assumes that the problem under investigation is observable and can be measured deductively [33]. The issue of analysis in this study was professional learning community status in secondary schools in Vietnam and Uganda.

3.2. Research design
The study employed a cross-sectional survey design. This design was considered appropriate because it permits a researcher to obtain useful data in a short period [34]. The cross-sectional design is widely considered ideal for collecting data within a short time without compromising the appropriateness of the data collected [35].

3.3. Study population and sampling
The study involved secondary school teachers in Vietnam and Uganda. Specifically, the teachers were selected from eight urban secondary schools in Vietnam and six urban secondary schools from Uganda. The sampling technique employed to select secondary school teachers that participated in the study was simple random. This technique was preferred because it enables a sample to be obtained from the population in a way that each individual of the sample population has equal chances of being selected [36]. Out of the 345 participants, 202 (58.6%) were from Vietnam while 143 (41.4%) were from Uganda.

3.5. Measures
The measurement scale adapted to measure professional learning communities profile aspects in the questionnaire was the 5-point Likert scale with one as the lowest point on the scale and five the highest (1=not applicable; 2=not at all; 3=not much; 4=much; 5=very much). In order to ensure that the instrument used in the study is valid and reliable, due effort was made to develop the instrument basing on existing credible studies [3], [5], [6], [9], [10], [12], [19]–[22], [31] whose validity and reliability are incontestable. Furthermore, reliability statistics on 21 items of the questionnaire were run using IBM Statistical Package for Social Science. The established reliability for this study was found to be .87. Moreover, a commonly accepted range for accepted reliability is between 0.6 and 0.7 [37].

3.6. Data collection
The collection of data was carried out using a self-administered questionnaire. The use of a questionnaire was considered appropriate because it is widely accepted as an efficient data collection mechanism in a positivist study where the researcher is conversant with measurement of variables under investigation [35]. The questionnaire comprised of a background information section and the professional learning community profile as perceived by the teachers in Vietnam and Uganda. The questionnaire was prepared in English as it is the international language the researchers and the respondents could conveniently

use. The questionnaire in Vietnam was administered online by the co-author residing in Vietnam while the questionnaire in Uganda was personally administered by the co-author residing in Uganda.

3.7. Statistical tests

Data were summarized using descriptive statistics as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. ANOVA test as presented in Table 3 and Tukey HSD test were performed to establish variations in the mean scores according to teachers working experiences. The respondents' responses were categorized as: <1.4 (not applicable); 1.5 to 2.4 (not at all); 2.5 to 3.4 (not much); 3.5 to 4.4 (much); and 4.5 to 5.0 (very much).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics regarding professional learning community status in Vietnam (n=202)

Item	Mean
I am well-informed about involvement in the PLC and expectations are clear	3.70
Structure of PLC is effective in meeting my professional needs.	4.10
We organize lessons as a team, discern and appraise colleagues' teaching and share instructional resources in my PLC.	3.89
There are experienced educators and teachers who add value on the teachers' knowledge about teaching and learning in my PLC.	3.64
PLC for secondary school teachers in my country is vibrant.	3.60
My school invests money and time that back PLC practices as a way of school life and culture.	3.79
Educational policy makers and managers value teacher PLCs in my country.	3.25

Table 2. Descriptive statistics regarding professional learning community status in Uganda (n=143)

Item	Mean
I am well-informed about involvement in the PLC and expectations are clear.	2.85
Structure of PLC is effective in meeting my professional needs.	3.02
We organize lessons as a team, discern and appraise colleagues' teaching and share instructional resources in my PLC.	3.08
There are experienced educators and teachers who add value on the teachers' knowledge about teaching and learning in my PLC.	3.22
PLC for secondary school teachers in my country is vibrant.	2.63
My school invests money and time backing PLC practices as a way of school life and culture.	2.70
Educational policy makers and managers value teacher PLCs in my country.	2.67

Table 3. ANOVA results regarding relevance of PLC on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda (n=345)

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
Between groups	11.584	4	2.896	2.849	0.24
Within groups	345.616	340	1.017		
Total	357.200	344			

4. RESULTS

4.1. The respondents background information

Regarding their gender distribution, 134 (38.8%) were males and 211 (61.2%) were females. Gender statistics from the individual country show that in Vietnam, males were 32 (15.8%) and females are 170 (84.2%) while in Uganda, males were 102 (71.3%) and females were 41 (28.7%). In regard to the highest teaching qualification, 247 (71.6%) of the respondents possessed a bachelor degree in education. Meanwhile, when it comes to the teaching experience, majority of the participants 101 (29.3%) had taught between 6-10 years, this was followed by those who had taught 16-20 years (87, 25.2%), 11-15 years (56, 16.2%), less than five years (56, 16.2%) and more than 21 years (45, 13%). Most of the participants (154, 44.6%) were between 26-35 years, with the next category between 36-45 years (137, 39.7%), 46-55 years (39, 11.3%), below 25 years (14, 4.1%) and only 01 (0.3%) participant was aged more than 56 years.

4.2. Professional learning community status- Vietnam

Secondary school teachers (n=202) in Vietnam responded to the questionnaire items on the status of professional learning communities in Vietnam. Descriptive results (Table 1) revealed that most secondary school teachers in Vietnam were well-informed and involved in professional learning communities and whether expectations were clear (Mean=3.70 corresponding to 'much'). The study findings herein imply that most secondary school teachers in Vietnam concurred that the extent the structure of professional learning communities was effective in meeting their professional needs (Mean=4.10). Findings of the study divulged that majority of the secondary school teachers in Vietnam regarding the extent they organized lessons as a team, discerned and appraised colleagues' teaching and shared instructional resources was 'much' (Mean=3.89).

Table 1 shows that most secondary school teachers in Vietnam regarding the extent there were experienced educators and teachers who added value on the teachers' knowledge was 'much' (Mean=3.64). The study results also showed that majority of the secondary school teachers in Vietnam regarding the extent to which professional learning communities for secondary school teachers were vibrant was 'much' (Mean=3.60). The study results herein suggest that majority of the secondary school teachers in Vietnam regarding the extent their schools invest money and time was 'much' (Mean=3.79). The results further unveil that majority of the secondary school teachers in Vietnam regarding the extent educational policy makers and managers value teacher professional learning communities in their country was 'not much' (Mean=3.25).

4.3. Professional learning community status- Uganda

Secondary school teachers (n=143) in Uganda responded to the questionnaire items that were used to measure the status of professional learning communities in Uganda. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the responses (Table 2). Results disclose that majority of the secondary school teachers in Uganda regarding how well-informed and involved in professional learning communities and whether expectations were clear was 'not much' (Mean=2.85). The study findings also revealed that most secondary school teachers in Uganda concurred that the extent the structure of professional learning communities was effective in meeting their professional needs was 'not much' (Mean=3.02). Study results divulged that most secondary school teachers in Uganda organized lessons as teams, discerned and appraised colleagues' teaching and shared instructional resources was 'not much' (Mean=3.08). Results further showed that majority of the secondary school teachers in Uganda regarding the extent there are experienced educators and teachers who added value on the teachers' knowledge about teaching and learning was 'not much' (Mean=3.22). Results herein correspondingly depicted that majority of the secondary school teachers in Uganda regarding the extent to which professional learning communities for secondary school teachers were vibrant was 'not much' (Mean=2.61). The study results suggested that majority of the secondary school teachers in Uganda regarding the extent their schools invested money and time backing professional learning community practices as a way of school life and culture was 'not much' (Mean=2.70). The teachers also indicated that with respect to whether Uganda educational policy makers and managers valued teacher professional learning communities in their country was "not much' (Mean=2.67).

4.4. Is there difference in perception between secondary school teachers of diverse teaching experience regarding the relevance of professional learning community on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda?

ANOVA and Tukey HSD were performed to establish whether there is a significant difference in perception between secondary school teachers of diverse teaching experience regarding the relevance of professional learning communities on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda. The finding exhibit that there is statistically significant difference in phenomenon under investigation. However, Table 4 reveals the mean differences of secondary school teachers of diverse teaching experience regarding the relevance of professional learning community on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda were small.

Table 4. Tukey HSD results regarding the relevance of PLC on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda (n=345)

(I) Teacher category	(J) Teaching experience	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Significance
Beginning teacher	6-10 years	0.01	0.17	1.00
	11-15 years	0.02	0.19	1.00
	16-20 years	-0.42	0.17	0.10
	More than 21 years	-0.20	0.20	0.87
Budding teacher	Less than 5 years	-0.01	0.17	1.00
	11-15 years	0.02	0.17	1.00
	16-20 years	-0.42*	0.15	0.03
	More than 21 years	-0.20	0.18	0.81
Experienced teacher	Less than 5 years	-0.02	0.19	1.00
	6-10 years	-0.02	0.17	1.00
	16-20 years	-0.44	0.17	0.08
	More than 21 years	-0.21	0.20	0.83
Expert teacher	Less than 5 years	0.42	0.17	0.11
	6-10 years	0.42*	0.15	0.34
	11-15 years	0.44	0.17	0.08
	More than 21 years	0.23	0.19	0.73
Veteran teacher	Less than 5 years	0.20	0.20	0.87
	6-10 years	0.20	0.18	0.81
	11-15 years	0.21	0.20	0.83
	16-20 years	-0.23	0.19	0.73

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4 shows that the important finding of the present study is that the status of professional learning communities in Vietnam is moderate. Meanwhile, the status of professional learning communities in Uganda is minimal. This tend to suggest that there is need for due effort to be undertaken to profoundly increase the position of professional learning communities in Vietnam and Uganda. Another important finding of the study is that secondary school teachers of diverse teaching experience recognize the relevance of professional learning communities on their professional development differently (Table 3 and Table 4). This is a very interesting finding which needs investigation to establish why secondary school teachers of diverse teaching experience notice the relevance of professional learning communities on their professional development differently.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to establish the status of professional learning community in Vietnam and Uganda. The study also set out to establish whether significant difference exists between the teaching experience of secondary teachers and how they perceive the relevance of professional learning community on professional development in Vietnam and Uganda. The findings reveal that involvement of secondary school teachers in professional learning community and the associated contribution on their professional development is 'moderate' in Vietnam, whilst, it is 'minimal' in Uganda. In light of the aforementioned observation, it is hereby inferred that, in both Vietnam and Uganda, secondary school teachers did not rate their participation in professional learning community and the associated contribution on their professional development as 'very much' which is the most ideal situation. The study also established that significant difference exists between the teaching experience of secondary teachers and how they perceive the relevance of professional learning communities on professional development. The findings herein are consistent with the studies conducted by researchers [6], [9] that professional learning community promote teaching and learning because teachers are able to teach in a better manner. The findings also concur with Aylsworth [10] that professional learning communities provide professional development opportunities to teachers to keep abreast with contemporary teaching and learning processes.

Furthermore, the study findings agree with Carpenter [11] that professional learning community positively influence teacher practice. Thus, the teacher is able to increase subject matter masterly as well as pedagogical competence. The study findings also are in agreement with Gaspar [13] that creating professional learning communities in schools produce gains in student achievement. It is undeniable that professional learning communities promote teacher quality and student learning [15]. In addition, the study findings agree with Hudson [16] that professional learning community is paramount to improve teacher competence. Hence, educational managers are required to encourage teachers to participate in professional learning communities [19]. Moreover, professional learning communities provide opportunities for group or collective learning [22].

The findings herein also agree with Pirtle and Tobi [27] that professional learning communities are effective when teachers demonstrate better instructional methods, techniques and strategies geared at improving student learning attainment. The study findings concur with Jones, Stall, and Yarbrough [32] that school leaders are critical in providing instructional leadership. As such, educational policy makers and managers ought to take the establishment of professional learning communities seriously in all schools particularly in countries like Uganda where it has been established that secondary school teachers' involvement in professional learning communities was "not much". This condition need urgent intervention measures because huge empirical data suggest that professional learning community enhance teacher competence which lead to high student learning achievement and outcome [6], [9], [13], [15], [16].

The study was exploratory in nature comprising small sample of secondary school teachers in few urban secondary schools in Vietnam and Uganda respectively to represent the target population i.e., secondary school teachers in Vietnam and Uganda. Consequently, the sample did not cater for the secondary school teachers in the rural setting, as such; the sample used in this study might not have reflected well the characteristics of all secondary school teachers in the entire Vietnam and Uganda. Furthermore, the study exclusively used quantitative data collection and analysis. Thus, it is hereby suggested that a mixed research method study be conducted covering the rural settings of Vietnam and Uganda in order to test the magnitude to which the results herein can be generalized. That said, for the case of Vietnam, it would good if research is conducted to establish the impact of professional learning community on teacher classroom practice and student achievement. Meanwhile, in Uganda, it would be thought-provoking to investigate factors impeding establishment of professional learning communities in secondary schools.

6.   CONCLUSION

The present study has successfully established the position of professional learning communities in Vietnam and Uganda as well as establishing whether significant difference exists between the teaching experience of secondary teachers and how they conceptualize the relevance of professional learning communities on professional development. The study has established that the status of professional learning communities in Vietnam is moderate, whilst, in Uganda is minimal. Furthermore, the study has established that there are statistically significant differences among secondary school teachers of diverse teaching experience regarding the relevance of professional learning communities on professional development. Accordingly, it is vital to contextualize professional learning community for teachers regardless of level if we want to adequately meet their professional development needs. Moreover, the present study finding is in tandem with the direction of the Uganda National Teacher Policy 2019 which seeks to improve the quality of teachers through continuous professional development. Additionally, this research affirms that professional learning community is an effective professional development strategy capable of enhancing teacher competence in countries lie Vietnam and Uganda.

The study findings herein act as a base for policy and managerial actions that focus on ensuring that professional learning communities are established and adequately facilitated so that teacher competence is enhanced in Vietnam and Uganda. This would then lead to high student learning achievement and outcome, thus, ultimately lead to the preparation of high-quality human resource that could be used to significantly contribute to socio-economic and national development of the aforementioned countries. Additionally, it is hereby advanced that professional learning community among secondary school teachers in Vietnam and Uganda should be made mandatory. It is as collaborating and networking among professionals regardless of context is one of the key competences required in the 21st century and beyond for professionals to thrive and not merely struggle to survive at the work place.

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