Examining Professional Learning Communities in Singapore through an Activity Theory Lens

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Drawing from a larger study of Professional Learning Community (PLC) in Singapore, this paper focuses on the qualitative findings, specifically looking at one of the key themes that emerged from the analysis. Using Engeström’s conceptualization of activity theory (2001) as the main analytical tool, the idea of risk-taking and innovation in Singapore schools will be explored, with regards to PLC.

The idea of PLC is inherently that of interconnecting communities of activity that form a culture or system of collaborative practice within and across schools. Engeström’s (2001) idea of activity theory lends itself well as an analytical tool as it proposes at least two human activity systems that interact and resultanty surface main tensions and contradictions within the entire system of activity. The identification of key internal contradictions is viewed as a driver for change which would ideally lead to improvement in practices. For the current study, PLC practices in twenty Singapore schools were studied through an online survey, focus group discussions and in-depth case studies. The qualitative findings that resulted were analysed and a key theme emerged that was evident across all twenty schools – change in teachers’ pedagogical practice through risk-taking and innovation seemed to be a major challenge.

As activity theory seeks to identify and distill inherent tensions and internal contradictions within a system, it was chosen as the analysis tool to further dissect the key theme identified and stated above. For this paper, the main units of analyses used are the individual actors within a school’s PLC, specifically, the school staff developer (SSD), the professional learning team leader (PLT-L) and professional learning team member (PLT-M). Each of the individual actors represent a human activity system. Within each of the three activity systems, the various components that make up the activity system were identified that contributed to innovative and risk-taking outcomes. These components include the subject, the object, mediating artifacts, rules, community, and division of labor. After which, gaps within each activity system were identified and explained in the form of a diagram showcasing the interaction of all three activity systems.

Resultant findings show that gaps exist within each of the activity systems that summarily contribute to risk-taking and innovation being a challenge to change in pedagogical practice within schools. These gaps include limitations in the division of labor for members, limitations in the mediating artifacts for leaders, and the critical component of the community for SSDs, amongst several other findings. Conclusively, activity theory serves as a useful and applicable means to identify and analyse PLC practices as it takes into account dynamic and nuanced interactions between activity systems even at the base unit of analysis that is the individual actor within a PLC. Subsequent analyses could consider expanding the use of activity theory by using a professional learning teams as the basic unit of analysis.