

School as Learning Community: A National Survey of Small, Medium, and Large Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Most research on schools as learning communities has been conducted in Western countries. Nevertheless, this Western paradigm drives educational reform policies in many developing countries. In Thailand, for example, several reform mandates call for schools to become “learning communities.” Within this context, three research questions guided the studies for small, medium, and large secondary schools: 1) what were the level of school as learning community, and the level of ten factors affecting school as learning community? 2) what was the relationships between ten factors, and between ten factors and school as learning community ? 3) Were any of the ten factors predictive of school as learning community?

Key words: School, Learning community,

Introduction

The ultimate goal of schools is student learning. As such, schools, more than any other organization in our society, should be “learning organizations.” (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Hughes, 1999; Ubben et. al., 2001, Sanrattana, 2005) However, Peter Senge (O’Neil, 1995) suggested almost twenty years ago that schools are not learning organizations:

A learning organization is an organization in which people at all levels are collectively, continually enhancing their capacity to create things they really want to create. And most of the educators I talk with don’t feel like they’re doing this. Most teachers feel oppressed trying to conform to all kinds of rules, goals, and objectives, many of which they don’t believe in. Teachers don’t work together; there’s very little sense of collective learning going on in most schools.

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During the last decade, however, there has been a renewed quest to transform schools into learning communities. This quest is based upon the assumption that, ideally, schools would grow and develop so that they can meet the increasingly complex challenges of educating all students during the 21st century. Schools that have been transformed into learning communities would reflect five qualities that Senge (1990) has identified as characteristic of learning organizations: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared values, and team learning.

Schools as learning communities has been extensively discussed, analyzed, and researched. To date, theories, research, and practice related to schools as learning communities have focused almost exclusively on the United States and other Western countries. Nevertheless, the Western paradigm of schools as learning communities has been used to develop policies for educational reform in many developing countries. Thailand is one such country—mandates contained in Thailand’s National Education Act 1999 (revised in 2002) are based, in large measure, on theories, research, and practice related to schools as learning communities. (Since 1961, Thailand has given focus to educational reform efforts through its “national development” plans [each with a five-year time span]). The eleventh five-year plan is a far-reaching master plan for educational reform throughout the nation. Included in this plan are policy directives designed to transform Thailand’s schools into learning communities.

With reference to the Thai educational context, Sanrattana (2001 revised in 2005 and 2013) has synthesized the research on characteristics of schools as learning communities (e.g. Owens, 2001; Punnitamai, 2001; Sroinam, 2004; Pedler et. al, 1991; Marquardt & Reynold, 1994; Seyfarth, 1999) and identified 21 indicators as a set of dependent variable (Y). In addition, Sanrattana has synthesized the research on factors affecting schools as learning communities (e.g. Bennett & O’Brien, 1994; Marquardt and Reynold, 1994; Kaiser, 2000, Razik & Swanson, 2001; Sergiovanni et. al.,1999) and identified the following ten factors as independent variables (Xs): (1) presence of school effectiveness indicators (X1), (2) professional organization (X2), (3) shared decision making and vision (X3), (4) self-managed group development and communication (X4), (5) creative motivation (X5), (6) transformational leadership (X6), (7) creative organizational culture and climate (X7), (8) change and innovation (X8), (9) authentic curriculum and instruction (X9), and (10) human resource development (X10).

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to study the small, medium, and large secondary schools separately as learning communities in Thailand in the following issues: 1) what were the level of school as learning community, and the level of ten factors affecting school as learning community? 2) what was the relationships between ten factors, and between ten factors and school as learning community ? 3) Were any of the ten factors predictive of school as learning community?

Conceptual Framework

From Sanrattana’s identification of 21 indicators as a set of dependent variable (Y) and ten factors as independent variables (Xs): (1) presence of school effectiveness indicators (X1), (2) professional organization (X2), (3) shared decision making and vision (X3), (4) self-managed group development and communication (X4), (5)

creative motivation (X5), (6) transformational leadership (X6), (7) creative organizational culture and climate (X7), (8) change and innovation (X8), (9) authentic curriculum and instruction (X9), and (10) human resource development (X10).

Research Hypothesis

The researchers proposed research hypothesis in order to predict answer as below:

- 1) There was a high level of school as learning community, and the level of ten factors affecting school as learning community.
- 2) There was a significant relationships between ten factors, and school as learning community
- 3) The ten factors had a strong affect on school as learning community

Methodology

- 1) **Population and sample:** The total target population for this study consisted of all of Thailand's secondary schools (N = 6,705). Separate studies were conducted at small, medium, and large secondary schools which "small" = <500 pupils; "medium" = 501-1,500; and "large" = >1,501. The target population were 920, 4,600, and 585 for small, medium, and large secondary schools respectively. Using Krejcie and Morgan's table (Creswell, 2005) for selecting a sample at a significance level of 0.95, a sample of 330, 355, and 290 for small, medium, and large secondary schools were obtained respectively.
- 2) **Instrumentation:** The researchers developed two sets of questionnaire: 1) a School as Learning Community Assessment Inventory (SLCAI) consisting of 21 items (indicators) based on a 5-point Likert scale. (1 = "not characteristic of my school" and 5 = "very characteristic of my school.") 2) a Ten Factors Affecting Schools as Learning Community Assessment Inventory (TFASLCAI) consisting of 80 items based on a 5-point Likert scale as well. Eight items were keyed to each of Sanrattana's ten factors. Using a panel of eight Thai professors of educational administration, the resultant SLCAI and TFASLCAI were analyzed to determine construct and content validity. In addition, the SLCAI and TFASLCAI were pilot tested at 30 secondary schools. Using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, an overall reliability of .8763 was obtained for the SLCAI, and .8352 was obtained for the TFASLCAI.
- 3) **Data Collection:** The researchers used a simple random sampling technique based on an Internet-based list of schools maintained by Thailand's Ministry of Education in 2014 (www.moe.go.th). At each school, the school administrator randomly selected one teacher to respond to the questionnaire. After follow-ups at each school, 258, 282, and 252 usable SLCAIs and TFASLCAIs were returned, for a return rate of 78.18, 79.43, and 86.89 percents for small, medium and large secondary schools respectively.
- 4) **Data Analysis:** Data were analyzed by computing basic descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. In addition, a correlation coefficient analysis was used, and significance was tested by use of t-tests. Also, a multiple regression analysis and F-test were used. Lastly, a linear coefficient analysis and significance testing by t-test was used.

Findings

Small secondary schools:

The salient findings for this study indicate that, overall, the schools reflect a “high” degree (mean = 3.88) of learning community. The strongest of the ten dimensions was creative motivation (mean = 4.41). The weakest of the ten dimensions was shared decision making and vision (mean = 3.65).

Among most of ten dimensions that were present at a “moderate” level, the correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships. In addition, there were statistically significant positive relationships between learning community and the following dimensions, in rank order: self-managed group development and communication, authentic curriculum and instruction, creative motivation, human resource development, creative organizational culture and climate, professional organization, presence of school effectiveness indicators, transformational leadership, change and innovation, and shared decision making and vision.

The multiple regression analysis revealed that each of the ten dimensions could predict 56.50 percent of the learning community. For the predictive equation, there were six dimensions that affect learning community at a statistically significant level: 1) presence of school effectiveness indicators, 2) shared decision making and vision, 3) self-managed group development and communication, 4) transformational leadership, 5) creative organizational culture and climate, and 6) change and innovation. The predictive equation was: $Y' = .312 + .141X1 - .188X3 + .863X4 - .272X6 + .322X7 - .258X8$

Medium secondary schools:

The salient findings for this study indicate that, overall, the schools reflect a “high” degree (mean = 3.86) of learning community. The strongest of the ten dimensions was human resource development (mean = 4.41). The weakest of the ten dimensions was transformational leadership (mean = 3.31).

Among most of ten dimensions that were present at a “high” level, the correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships. In addition, there were statistically significant positive relationships between learning community and the following dimensions, in rank order: self-managed group and communication, authentic curriculum and instruction, creative motivation, creative organizational culture and climate, professional organization, human resource development, presence of school effectiveness indicators, transformational leadership, change and innovation, and shared decision making and vision.

The multiple regression analysis revealed that each of the ten dimensions could predict 49.63 percent of the learning community. For the predictive equation, there were five dimensions that affect learning community at a statistically significant level: 1) self-managed group development and communication, 2) shared decision making and vision, 3) presence of school effectiveness indicators, 4) change and innovation, and 5) creative organizational culture and climate. The predictive equation was: $Y' = .252 + .157X4 - .151X3 + .865X1 - .304X8 + .347X7$

Large secondary schools:

The salient findings for this study indicate that, overall, the schools reflect a “high” degree (mean = 3.85) of learning community. The strongest of the ten dimensions was organizational culture and climate (mean = 4.14). The weakest of the ten dimensions was transformational leadership (mean = 3.42).

Among most of ten dimensions that were present at a “high” level, the correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships. In addition, there were statistically significant positive relationships between learning community and the following dimensions, in rank order: self managed group development and communication, curriculum and instruction, creative motivation, human resource development, creative organizational culture and climate, professional organization, presence of school effectiveness indicators, transformational leadership, change and innovation, and shared decision making and vision.

The multiple regression analysis revealed that each of the ten dimensions could predict 56.20 percent of the learning community. For the predictive equation, there were two dimensions that affect learning community at a statistically significant level: self-managed group development and communication and presence of school effectiveness indicators. The predictive equation was: $Y' = .614 + 0.352X_4 + 0.324X_1$.

Recommendations

Small secondary schools:

1. should aim to develop “shared decision making and vision” because the results showed the lowest level. Meanwhile, should maintain their advantage in the “creative motivation” because the results showed the highest practical level.
2. should focus on six dimensions that affect learning community at a statistically significant level: 1) presence of school effectiveness indicators, 2) shared decision making and vision, 3) self-managed group development and communication, 4) transformational leader, 5) creative organizational culture and climate, and 6) change and innovation
3. should seek other factors to strengthen the learning community as 10 factors studied affect the learning community only 56.50 percent.

Medium secondary schools:

4. should aim to develop “transformational leadership” because the results showed the lowest level. Meanwhile, should maintain their advantage in the “human resource development” because the results showed the highest practical level.
5. should focus on five dimensions that affect learning community at a statistically significant level: 1) self-managed group development and communication, 2) shared decision making and vision, 3) presence of school effectiveness indicators, 4) change and innovation, and 5) creative organizational culture and climate.
6. should seek other factors to strengthen the learning community as 10 factors studied affect the learning community only 49.63 percent.

Large secondary schools:

7. should aim to develop “transformational leadership” because the results showed the lowest level. Meanwhile, should maintain their advantage in the “organizational culture and climate” because the results showed the highest practical level.

8. should focus on two dimensions that affect learning community at a statistically significant level: self-managed group development and communication and presence of school effectiveness indicators
9. should seek other factors to strengthen the learning community as 10 factors studied affect the learning community only 56.20 percent.

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