



Methods of Teachers' Professional Competency Development by Organizing School-Based Learning Communities in Vietnam

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 24 March 2025	Achievements of educational researchers in Vietnam and in the world have affirmed the close relationship between professional learning communities and teachers' professional competency development in the modern education system. The professional learning communities are the purpose, the tool, and the environment for teachers' professional competency development.
Corresponding Author: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Truong Thi Bich	Based on the theoretical background of the above content, the article recommends some methods of teachers' professional competency development by organizing school-based learning communities.
KEYWORDS: Learning community; professional competencies; professional competency development; workplace learning.	

1. FOREWORD

Learning community is one of concepts that is mentioned a lot in education today. According to recent researches, the sense of community has four components: membership, influence, fulfillment of individuals needs and shared events and emotional connections. Members of a learning community not only help other members in their community but also build, maintain, and develop their community.

Researches of educators on "School of the 21st Century" have indicated one of three basic characteristics that schools should change their function, which is to become local education and culture centers, to promote teachers in their professional competency development. "Schools must become places where teachers act as professional educators and learn from each other (learning communities) is the research result of authors Manabu Sato, Manaaki Sato [5]. It means that schools must become a professional learning community where teachers not only help each other but particularly establish a culture of sharing in their schools to create collaboration, attraction and continuous development, focus on practical thinking so as to improve students' learning outcomes, etc. And the ultimate goal is that all teachers aim to their personal professional competency development as well as learners' learning outcomes [5].

Atwal, K [1], in his research on theories of workplace learning, showed that through learning communities, teachers can discuss, share about their professional knowledge and skills with experienced teachers and with each other who also experience difficulties and obstacles in their practical activities in schools. Darling Hammond (1995) suggested that a

learning community is a model of developing teachers' professional competencies efficiently and supporting learners' learning outcomes [3]. Researcher DuFour affirmed that "the process of professional learning communities provides the best environment for teachers' efficient professional development in schools" [4]. Tan, L.S, & Ang, K.C added that the establishment of learning communities in schools is a way to maximize the professional development in schools today: "Many researches indicated that activities organized in learning communities can provide teachers with practical learning; such activities often include: teachers observe the practice of each other, give and receive feedbacks, participate in professional researches, participate in discussions, talks to debate together, etc., which are all typical activities of school-based learning communities"[15].

In Vietnam, how to build efficient school-based learning communities is a question for education managers. It is meaningful to research and recommend methods of teachers' professional competency development by developing workplace leaning communities.

2. FINDINGS

The Article focuses on recommending 5 methods of teachers' professional competency development through school-based learning communities in Vietnam.

2.1. Method 1: Enhance teachers' awareness of professional competency development and the role of learning communities in professional development

Awareness is the first stage and the premise of correct actions. Therefore, in teachers' professional

competency development, the enhancement of awareness and responsibility of teachers - the subject of professional competency development - should be considered as a very important factor and a prerequisite for successful teachers’ professional competency development.

School boards should find a way to help their teachers fully and correctly aware of the role and importance of professional competence development as vital conditions of each school, each teacher in enhancing education quality; create a strong change in awareness; clearly understand contents, forms of professional competency development so that such activities will become regular missions and needs of each teacher in schools. Only when members in schools are clearly aware of problems, have needs, and are voluntary to learn for professional competency development and commits to participating in the development of school-based learning communities can teachers’ professional competencies develop continuously, sustainably, and efficiently. To achieve the above goals, School boards need to take the following actions:

(i) Right at the beginning of a school year, based on regulations of the Ministry, Department, and Bureau of Education and Training on missions of the school year, School Boards need to organize to disseminate plans and documents relating to purposes, contents, and forms of professional competency development to all teachers. It is necessary to clearly consider professional development as teachers’ compulsory mission. The contents of this mission must be included in yearly plans of schools, of professional teams and individual plans of teachers.

(ii) Hold specialized conferences, seminars, talks with participation and guidance of experts or teachers with successful professional development to allow insiders talk about the necessity for learning and professional skill improvement as well as share experiences, lessons of success in professional development, especially self-learning, learning from each other, etc. to create learning communities in schools.

(iii) Schools also need to organize teachers to learn seriously to clearly see their roles, positions, responsibilities and schools’ ones in professional competency development. Schools also need to disseminate regulatory documents, directives, resolutions relating to professional development so that all members in schools can thoroughly grasp policies and regulations to cooperate with each other in self-improvement and mutual improvement to develop their professional competencies with the ultimate goal of enhancing educational quality of schools.

2.2. Method 2: Make plans and implement plans for development and enhancement of teachers’ professional competencies by organizing school-based learning communities

The essence of making plans for professional competency development through learning communities is to determine development goals that individuals/teams/schools

are aiming for in the coming school year; what needs to be done, how, when and who will do it to achieve such development goals. To achieve that, in making a plan, it is necessary to clarify the following 4 important questions:

- Who and where are we? It means that it is necessary to analyze existing conditions of schools relating to teachers’ professional competency development and development of learning communities.

- Where do we want to go? That is to determine goals of plans for teachers’ professional competency development as well as visions and goals of school-based learning communities.

- What should we do? How to do? What means or tools should we use to reach the expected position? Determine contents, forms of organizing, methods, means of inspecting, assessing, etc., activities of teachers’ professional competency development and development of learning communities.

- How do we know we are reaching our goals? Determine resources to implement teachers’ professional competency development activities and development of learning communities.

To answer the above questions, School boards need to:

- Direct professional teams to make their own professional development plans based on individual plans. Each teacher and each professional team leader must research and study difficulties and obstacles in practical activities of teachers, necessary aspects to be trained, etc., in order to make individual plans and team plans.

- Based on professional development plans of teams, schools proceed to make their professional development plans. School boards need to choose most prioritized contents and forms of professional development of professional teams to form common topics for the whole school, and specific contents of each professional team, etc.

- Develop the content structure of plans

- Develop operational plans, concretize learning activities for professional competency development.

- Inspect and assess the implementation of the plans (regularly, periodically, unexpectedly throughout the school year) to collect feedback, timely implement adjustments and supplements to ensure the feasibility of the plans. This is the final stage and the final assessment of the plans and this is one of the data for making a plan for the new cycle.

The plan for teachers’ professional competency development must be communicated and explained to departments and individuals in the school to obtain high consensus in the pedagogical community. Functions and powers of each department must be clearly defined. Schools must pay attention to promoting the role of professional team leaders and group leaders in making and directing the implementation of the plans. It is necessary to allocate funds

and material conditions for the implementation of the plans, etc.

After making an annual professional competency development plan for the school’s teaching staff, the principal must issue regulations related to participation in the professional competency development plan, including rights, obligations, responsibilities and benefits of managers and teachers who participate in training as a basis for competition, rewards and sanctions for violations. At the same time, the principal also needs to establish a department to monitor the implementation of the plan, which may be headed by the Vice Principal in charge of professional matters so as to, through this department, disseminate the principal’s directions to each member in the school, as well as promptly grasp the implementation situation, difficulties, obstacles and implementation quality.

2.3. Method 3: Make plans and carry out innovation of professional activities toward lesson study

Effective professional learning is a long-term commitment and often best implemented within a learning community that promotes the learning of all members. According to E. Saito, lesson study is an approach to teachers’ professional learning that emphasizes both long-term implementation and absolute belief in the effectiveness of learning. Lesson study is the first “brick” to build awareness, colleague relationships, ensure the development of the school as a professional learning community. A true learning community is a place where knowledge and experience are shared and changed together. Teachers have a relationship of mutual acceptance, mutual concern, find solutions together to solve difficulties, negotiate and discuss to solve problems with their own ego. [12].

According to the World Association of Lesson Studies, a lesson study has several values, including:

(i) Schools are places for collaborative learning because human relationships are essential. Lesson study brings teachers, who are working alone, back to work together;

(ii) Lesson study is the first brick to build awareness, colleague relationships, ensure the development of schools as “learning communities” where knowledge and experience are shared and changed together by teachers; teachers care for each other, find solutions to difficulties, negotiate and discuss to solve problems, etc.;

(iii) Nghiên cứu bài học chuyển người giáo viên giữ kín những gì học được sang giáo viên biết chia sẻ cho nhau. Chuyển giáo viên thường làm những việc đã quen và cho rằng nó đang tốt sang xem xét lại thực tế và điều chỉnh, thay đổi;

(iv) Giáo viên không thể thay đổi người khác hoặc quá khứ nhưng họ có thể thay đổi được bản thân và tầm nhìn ở hiện tại và tương lai nhờ tham gia nghiên cứu bài học [12].

Sự khác biệt cơ bản giữa nghiên cứu bài học như là một mô hình bồi dưỡng, phát triển nghề nghiệp cho giáo viên với cách bồi dưỡng tập huấn hay dự giờ truyền thống ở chỗ:

(iii) Lesson study shifts teachers from keeping what they have learned for themselves to sharing it with each other. It shifts teachers from doing their familiar activities that are working well in their opinion to reviewing the reality and adjusting and changing;

(iv) Teachers cannot change others or their past, but they can change themselves and their vision in the present and future by participating in lesson studies [12].

The basic difference between lesson studies as a model of teachers’ professional development and traditional training or observation is as follows:

First, instead of providing knowledge identified by experts outside the school, lesson studies originate from the need to solve problems in practical classrooms that teachers are facing. When participating in lesson studies, research groups themselves recognize requirements to be solved for each specific lesson and discuss together to find solutions to such requirements. In lesson studies, there may also be the participation of external experts, but they only play the role of observers, consultants, draw on the experience of the team and provide additional experiences of other research teams, not a leading role like in other traditional methods.

Second, the relationship among participants in lesson studies is equal, different from the hierarchical relationship between teachers and learners in training classes. In traditional teacher training methods, teachers play the role of learners and experts play the role of teachers, providers of knowledge. In lesson studies, participants have the same role, work together, research together, discuss together towards a common goal of development. Participants in lesson studies are voluntary and have an equal role in developing lessons to achieve the set goals.

Third, in training classes, teachers are the ones who acquire new knowledge (in a passive role), while in lesson studies, teachers play an active role as reformers, observers, and self-assessors of their own practice. Teachers are the ones who bring new things into teaching activities, are observers of reality and can self-assess their own abilities through direct classroom observations.

With the traditional way of class observations, qualities and competencies of teachers are always an issue to be evaluated. Teachers always have a burden of ranking and mainly focus on their lectures and lesson plans, with little concern about how students learn. Meanwhile, in lesson studies, observations are directed towards all students in a class, not just outstanding students, even pay more attention to individual students to see how students learn, how students think, but not evaluate qualities or competencies of teachers. Teachers give comments for the purpose of helping each other to improve, not to evaluate other teachers, so the comments are sincere and all members can freely express their opinions without fear of reducing solidarity among colleagues.

To implement this method, School Boards need to direct the development and implementation of a specific plan for innovation of professional activities based on lesson studies in the scale of a professional team as well as in the scale of the whole grade, the whole school, with a focus on the following:

- In the annual plan, it is necessary to create a lesson study registration form so that teachers in the whole school can easily monitor and make a plan for class observation and reflection with colleagues.

- Decide on specific time for class observation and reflection.

- Organize teachers to observe each other within a team/within the school by each key topic.

School Boards need to develop a process of organizing professional activities according to lesson studies, including the following steps:

Step 1: First, schools should choose teachers who are good at the intended fields and topics of the lesson study, have been trained, and have a good understanding of professional activities according to the lesson study for demo lessons. Schools need to orient the participating teachers on the key topics so that, during the class observation process, they will focus on taking notes and recording videos of aspects and situations related to the topics.

Step 2: Sharing and discussing after class. All teachers who observe lessons and teachers who teach demo lessons should meet to share design ideas and observed students’ learning behaviors and expressions, and discuss to explain the situations in the lessons, students’ learning behaviors and the causes to good or bad learning behaviors in such specific learning situations. Here, the relationship between students’ learning signs and behaviors during the learning process and materials, learning tasks, friends, groups, teachers, etc. will be analyzed along with suggestions of measures and solutions for improvement. This is an open environment for analysis from different perspectives of the participants in the discussion.

- Encourage all teachers to conduct demo lessons

Letting experienced, good teachers conduct demo lessons is to help other teachers better understand the lesson study and see the benefits for both teachers and observers of demo lessons. This will stimulate other teachers to want and voluntarily register to teach demo lessons without having any pressure of evaluation, comments, classification, etc. Besides, in lesson studies, there is often a group of teachers preparing the same “lesson” for demo teaching and this is considered a collective “project”, thus it somewhat reduces the pressure on teachers who conduct demo lessons, helps teachers learn from experience right in the way to design lessons. At first, lesson studies can be organized by professional teams, but gradually, some lesson studies should be organized by grade - that is, notwithstanding subjects taught by grade, teachers observe lessons together and reflect on lessons.

For teachers who conduct demo lessons for the first time, it should only be done within the professional team, or even only among teachers in the professional team who teach the same grade to initially reduce pressure on them. For subsequent demo lessons, it can be conducted among all teachers in the professional team. During the exchange and discussion process, in addition to the general process mentioned above, it is necessary to facilitate young teachers to conduct demo lessons to exchange opinions with their colleagues, clarify the opinions that young teachers find unclear or still confused. After the discussion, young teachers can adjust the lesson and teach it in another class.

2.4. Method 4: Diversify forms of learning for on-site teachers’ professional competency development on the Internet

Teachers’ professional competency development in the form of on-site learning on the Internet is especially meaningful because teachers can directly access experts and create multi-dimensional interactions, without distance in time and space. They learn fully and thoroughly the contents of training; they exchange and share expertise and professional skills with experienced teachers and with each other who experience the same difficulties and obstacles in professional practice. In addition, the daily participation in the workplace is a great source of informal learning resources for teachers when they receive support and feedback from colleagues that helps them become more confident, more connected to the school, to the profession, etc. This form of professional development meets both individual and collective needs, and thus helps teachers create learning processes that adapt to social changes in an open and collaborative atmosphere [2]. However, this is not a form of training to replace other traditional forms, but a solution for all teachers to have the opportunity to learn at low cost and learn anytime, anywhere, etc.

In the current era of information technology and the Internet, many Vietnamese people in general and teachers in particular have been using social networks to exchange information with each other such as email, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Therefore, forms of online learning need to be diverse: it can be online networks designed and built by management agencies at the national and local levels (Learning Management System -LMS of technology corporations such as Viettel, VNPT, etc.), or they can be email boxes, school websites or using social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Zalo, etc. In other words, these are formal learning and informal learning forms [8].

Each school can use the school website, Zalo group by professional team to create forums for teachers in the school to share good experiences in teaching and education or download thematic articles of reputable authors, educational researchers, etc.; or register a common email for teachers in the whole school or by professional team, etc. to encourage and facilitate them to exchange and share directly

the problems they are facing, good initiatives, new ideas, collections they have collected in images (videos) or articles, etc. Besides, schools also need to establish groups of teachers with experience in different fields to support colleagues through online information networks.

2.5. Method 5: Develop a collaborative, shared work environment in schools

Work environment is a broad concept that includes everything related to and directly affecting the activities and development, improvement of the working capacity of each individual, officer, employee (including internal and external environment): Facilities, policies, relationships between leaders and employees and among employees. Nowadays, the work environment is an important factor that greatly affects the productivity and work quality of employees. If employees see a professional and modern work environment with many factors that encourage and promote the development of their work capacity, they themselves will have more motivation and work effort that create their trust, opportunities, and satisfaction to their organizations, and encourage them to work actively.

The school environment consists of the physical environment and social-emotional climate. To build a learning community, it is necessary to pay attention to the social-emotional climate in the school, that is the relationships and interactions occurring among the subjects of activities in performing teaching-learning tasks. The social-emotional climate creates a favorable psychological atmosphere in the school community and facilitates interactions among teachers. The significance of the social environment for the learning process in general and for teachers in particular can be explained by the interaction theory of L.S Vygotsky. The basic viewpoint of this theory is that, through interactions with each other, each person learns something from others at the high level of thinking in different ways and in different circumstances [14].

- Building positive, friendly, united relationships, etc. among teachers in schools: To create a favorable school environment, create opportunities for and facilitate teachers’ professional development and build learning communities in schools, School Boards need to attach much importance to building relationships among teachers in schools. Good colleague relationships not only create opportunities to learn and share teaching experiences but also create a comfortable, pleasant, united atmosphere, thereby stimulate teachers to be attached to their schools, their jobs, and to improve the teaching quality. Good colleague relationships are built on will to help and support each other when needed, cooperation in work, sharing of personal experiences, etc. To have these relationships, schools need to organize many collective activities, professional activities, cultural and sport exchanges, etc., that facilitate teachers to interact with each other in teaching activities as well as collective activities.

- Xây dựng văn hóa nhà trường: Ngoài ra, Ban Giám hiệu nhà trường cũng cần chú trọng xây dựng văn hóa nhà trường. Khi nhà trường có văn hóa tích cực, mang tính chuyên môn cao, thì ở đó sẽ có sự phát triển đội ngũ giáo viên có ý nghĩa, cải cách chương trình thành công. Ở những trường học như thế, giáo viên và học sinh đều trưởng thành. Ở trường học, giáo viên được chia sẻ sự tham gia, lãnh đạo dân chủ, công bằng và gần gũi, thân mật, cơ cấu tổ chức hợp lý thì sẽ trải nghiệm những xúc cảm tích cực và hài lòng với công việc của mình, giảng dạy có hiệu quả

- Building school culture: In addition, School Boards also need to focus on building school culture. When a school has a positive, highly professional culture, there will be meaningful development of the teaching staff and successful curriculum reform. In such schools, both teachers and students are mature. In schools, teachers share democratic, fair, close and intimate participation, leadership, and a reasonable organizational structure that helps them experience positive emotions and satisfaction with their work, and effective teaching. [12]. Besides, a positive school culture will encourage teachers to work hard for the school’s noble goals. They work actively, creatively, support innovation and focus on the learning of all students. A positive school culture will promote friendly, cooperative and shared relationships among teachers as well as between teachers and students. Teachers will confidently and comfortably share and discuss difficulties, knowledge, professional experience; care for and cooperate with each other in work, etc. And then, it creates learning communities as well as develops teachers’ professional competencies.

Nghiên cứu của nhiều tác giả cho thấy để tạo ra cộng đồng học tập trong nhà trường, các cán bộ quản lý cần chú trọng xây dựng và tạo ra các giá trị cốt lõi trong nhà trường [6]. Đó là các giá trị:

Researches of many authors showed that managers need to focus on building and creating core values in schools to create school-based learning communities [6]. Such values include:

- Open-mindedness: the ability to accept different feedback and apply what one has learned to the appropriate educational context.

- Mutual respect: appreciating and respecting cooperation and sharing in work by analyzing and reflecting on different educational practices in a constructive manner, good will and mutual trust.

- Trust: Sincere independence and interdependence.

- Chia sẻ sự lãnh đạo: với tư cách là đại diện của mỗi tổ chức nhà trường, từng membership trở thành người lãnh đạo cho cộng đồng hoặc hệ thống giáo dục/nhà trường của mình, cùng chịu trách nhiệm về xây dựng cộng đồng học tập và chất lượng giáo dục ở cả trong các hoạt động chính thức và không chính thức.

- Hiểu biết: cùng nhau kiến tạo sự hiểu biết.

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- Shared leadership: as a representative of each school organization, each member becomes a leader of his/her community or education system/school and takes responsibility for building a learning community and for education quality in both formal and informal activities.

- Knowledge: creating knowledge together.

- Commitment: ensuring the effectiveness of the learning community through the active participation of members.

- Collaboration: all members share power, authority and make decisions to support the activities of the learning community with the ultimate goal of improving the education quality of the school.

Thus, building a friendly, collaborative and shared work environment in schools is really an important method in supporting teachers to improve their teaching and educational competencies.

3. CONCLUSION

In developing professional competencies for teachers of general education, the above recommended methods need to be implemented synchronously and have close relationships with each other. It is difficult to say which method is the most important or which method is more important. To effectively implement these methods, the management role of School Boards is decisive. Each teacher has the need and desire to develop themselves and to improve their teaching and educational competencies. Therefore, they really need a good environment to share and support each other in terms of professional knowledge. They also need to be guided, supervised, checked, encouraged, and motivated for their efforts in continuous working and self-study. These methods, if seriously implemented and annually maintained, will contribute to teachers’ professional competency development, help them become professional teachers with basic roles in the context of international integration: Educator - Researcher - Culturalist - Lifelong Learner.

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