

COLLABORATION WITHIN
INTERCULTURAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
A CASE STUDY

By
Gregory S. Brunton

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Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a way of organizing educational staff so that they can engage in purposeful, collegial learning with the aim of improving staff effectiveness so that all students learn successfully to high standards (Hord, 2008). But what is it like trying to collaborate on what I call an *intercultural PLC*, comprised of teachers of different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, educational and teaching experiences, and English proficiency levels, at a private, international, International Baccalaureate (IB) school in China?

Need for the Study: The Problem

The effectiveness of PLCs depends on the ability of educators to collaborate. Attempts to promote collaboration among educators inevitably collide with the tradition of teacher isolation (DuFour, 2011). However, if educators collaborate, the process of reflecting on teaching and learning in order to determine what is best for the students leads to discussions about values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, perspectives, and behaviors. This process of questioning activities and challenging values almost certainly leads to conflict (Hord, 1997).

International schools (for the purposes of this paper defined as schools where staff of different nationalities teach an international curriculum to students of different nationalities) interested in using the PLC model may have magnified or unusual challenges when compared to schools where the teachers come from the same culture. At many international schools, teachers are recruited from various countries and bring different cultural experiences to the school's teaching teams.

In addition, some international schools, while using English as the main language of instruction, hire teachers from the host culture. The local teachers may not be proficient English speakers, and may have very different cultural beliefs, educational backgrounds, and training, and yet are expected to work collaboratively on intercultural teams. Thus further, specific

challenges are faced in establishing collaboration in an intercultural PLC, compared to PLCs composed of a mono-cultural background, as reported by previous research. “One of the key factors in successful collaboration is reconciling or accepting differing educational philosophies. These differences may well occur with a team of teachers from the same culture, but are even more likely to arise with teachers from different countries” (Carless & Walker, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe collaboration in the context of an intercultural PLC comprised of teachers of different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, educational and teaching experiences, and English proficiency levels at a private, international, IB school in Shanghai, China. A review of the research literature indicated that no studies have yet been undertaken to examine how intercultural PLC teams with such diverse backgrounds overcome these normal, and possibly intensified, challenges to collaboration. If we can understand the challenges facing teachers who work on an intercultural PLC, and the conditions that foster or hinder collaboration in this context, then it is hoped that this research can lead to a greater understanding of how collaborative relationships work and how to actively encourage them.

Context of the Study

The site for this case study was chosen because of its intercultural teams consisting of teachers who have many differences in nationality, cultural background, educational and teaching experience, and English proficiency. The context of the intercultural teams within this site is radically different when compared to teaching teams in the United States, other countries, or international schools with teachers from predominantly one nationality or culture.

The research site is a private, for-profit, international school in Shanghai, China established in 2006. The school consists of separate Early Years, Primary, and Secondary

Schools located together on a 16-acre campus. Separate principals lead each school with the Director overseeing the three individual schools. As of August 2014, approximately 130 teachers from 26 different countries work at the school. The school has 785 students from over 45 different countries. Over 50% of the students are European; Americans represent the largest nationality at approximately 12%, followed by Germans and Koreans at approximately 11% each. School fees are approximately \$32,000 US per year.

To better meet the diverse needs of the students, every Early Years and Primary class uses an intercultural co-teacher model where one teacher is a Chinese national, most often educated and trained through the Chinese school system, and the other teacher is an expatriate, educated and trained outside of Asia, most commonly in America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, or New Zealand. Both teachers share responsibilities for teaching within the IB's Primary Years Programme (PYP), which has an inquiry-based, concept-driven curriculum framework and which does not coincide with either teacher's own educational background. In the Early Years, each class also has an assistant, a Chinese national, in addition to the two classroom teachers. Each grade level thus consists of an established intercultural PLC team comprised of smaller, co-teaching, classroom teams. Except for the 45-minute Chinese language lesson each day, all instruction is in English. The Secondary School does not use the intercultural co-teacher model.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions in order to describe, interpret and explain collaboration in the context of an intercultural PLC comprised of teachers with many cultural differences at this private, international school in Shanghai.

1. What experiences do these teachers have collaborating in an intercultural professional learning community at this school?
2. What are the successes of collaboration in this context?
3. What are the challenges to collaboration in this context?
4. How do these teachers address the challenges to collaboration?
5. What factors support or hinder collaboration in this context?

Limitations

The number of participants used was based on the need for an in-depth understanding of the unique context and the different perspectives of the participants. Therefore, the findings of this study will add to the research base and is not intended to be generalizable.

As the Primary School Principal at the research site, I knew the participants from the Early Years School professionally. Though I was not their supervisor, the professional relationship between the participants and myself may have affected the participants' attitudes and openness to the study. My views on the benefits of strong, collaborative partnerships, based on respect, are known within the school community.

The study used data collection methods including anonymous surveys, a focus group, observations, and interviews to provide four completely different points for data collection, enabling triangulation of sources. Each data collection method has strengths and weaknesses, so by using four collection methods, the strengths of one method can compensate for the weaknesses of another.

As teachers in all teaching positions are required to have a high level of English for employment, data collection methods were in English. As approximately half of the participants are native Chinese speakers, the survey part of the data collection was translated into Chinese

and a Chinese interpreter was available for the other data collection methods, but none of the participants felt a translator was needed.

Review of the Literature

As schools look for the best ways to maximize student learning, the use of PLCs is increasing in popularity. Though many definitions and variations exist, simply put, a PLC provides a way of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful, collegial learning with the purpose of improving staff effectiveness so all students learn successfully to high standards (Hord, 2008). The three big ideas of PLCs have been described as a shift toward focusing on learning instead of teaching, a culture of collaboration for analyzing and improving classroom practice, and judging the effectiveness of the team on the basis of results (DuFour, 2004). The eight key characteristics of an effective PLC have been described as:

1. shared values and mission
2. collective responsibility
3. reflective professional inquiry
4. collaboration
5. promotion of individual and group learning
6. mutual respect, trust and support
7. inclusive membership
8. openness, networks and partnerships (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006)

The use of PLCs provides benefits for teachers, staff, and students. For teachers, PLCs reduce teacher isolation, increase commitment to the school's mission and goals, create a shared responsibility for the holistic development of students, create powerful learning that defines good

teaching and classroom practice, and facilitate understanding of course content and roles (Hord, 1997). Studies have shown that students also benefit when their teachers work within PLCs, as indicated by improved achievement scores (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). The more developed a PLC, the more positive the association with key measures of effectiveness of professional learning and student achievement. (Bolam et al., 2005).

Collaboration is central to the effectiveness of a PLC. Everyone must belong to a team; teams must have time to meet during the workday; the work must focus on learning; teams need to develop agreements for the expectations of roles, responsibilities and relationships; and the team's goals need to align with school and district goals (DuFour, 2004). Collaborative cultures are evolutionary relationships of openness, trust, and support among teachers, within which they define and develop their own purposes of community (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

Collaborative cultures are fostered when school leaders (a) bring new members who welcome collaboration into the PLC teams, (b) carefully delineate work assignments and timetabling, (c) establish collegial expectations with beginning teachers through induction and mentoring roles, (d) enable department or subject area collaboration within and across schools, (e) provide opportunities for leadership and collaboration, and (f) clearly delineate supervisory and collaborative relations (Riordan & da Costa, 1998). Once teachers collaborate, the process of talking about values, beliefs, perspectives, and expectations will lead to conflict. A level of conflict within a PLC is good, as conflict creates the context for learning and thus the ongoing renewal of communities (Achinstein, 2002). Though conflict is traditionally avoided, principals can address conflict by providing an environment where teachers can resolve their dissension through discussion and debate, in essence, consistently addressing disagreements by providing

opportunities for ongoing discussion and exploration (Hord, 1997). Relational trust appears to foster collaboration and if PLCs do not have trust, they will fall flat (Cranston, 2011).

To create an effective PLC focusing on student achievement, DuFour and Mattos (2013) recommend using five steps. The first is to embrace the premise that the purpose of a school is to ensure all students learn at high levels. Second, to organize meaningful collaborative teams with shared and mutually accountable goals. Third, to establish guaranteed and viable curriculum and assessments. Fourth, to use the evidence of learning to support students who need help and that teachers help each other to develop strategies to provide that support. Fifth, to develop a coordinated intervention plan that is timely, directive, precise, and systematic (DuFour & Mattos, 2013)

Many international schools have staff from different cultures with different educational backgrounds, training, and levels of English proficiency, yet there is the same expectation of collaboration as within schools consisting of one culture. Collaboration within intercultural teams is just as important, but the process brings intercultural staff closer, giving rise to different or magnified challenges. “One of the key factors in successful collaboration is reconciling or accepting differing educational philosophies. These differences may well occur with a team of teachers from the same culture, but are even more likely to arise with teachers from different countries” (Carless & Walker, 2006)

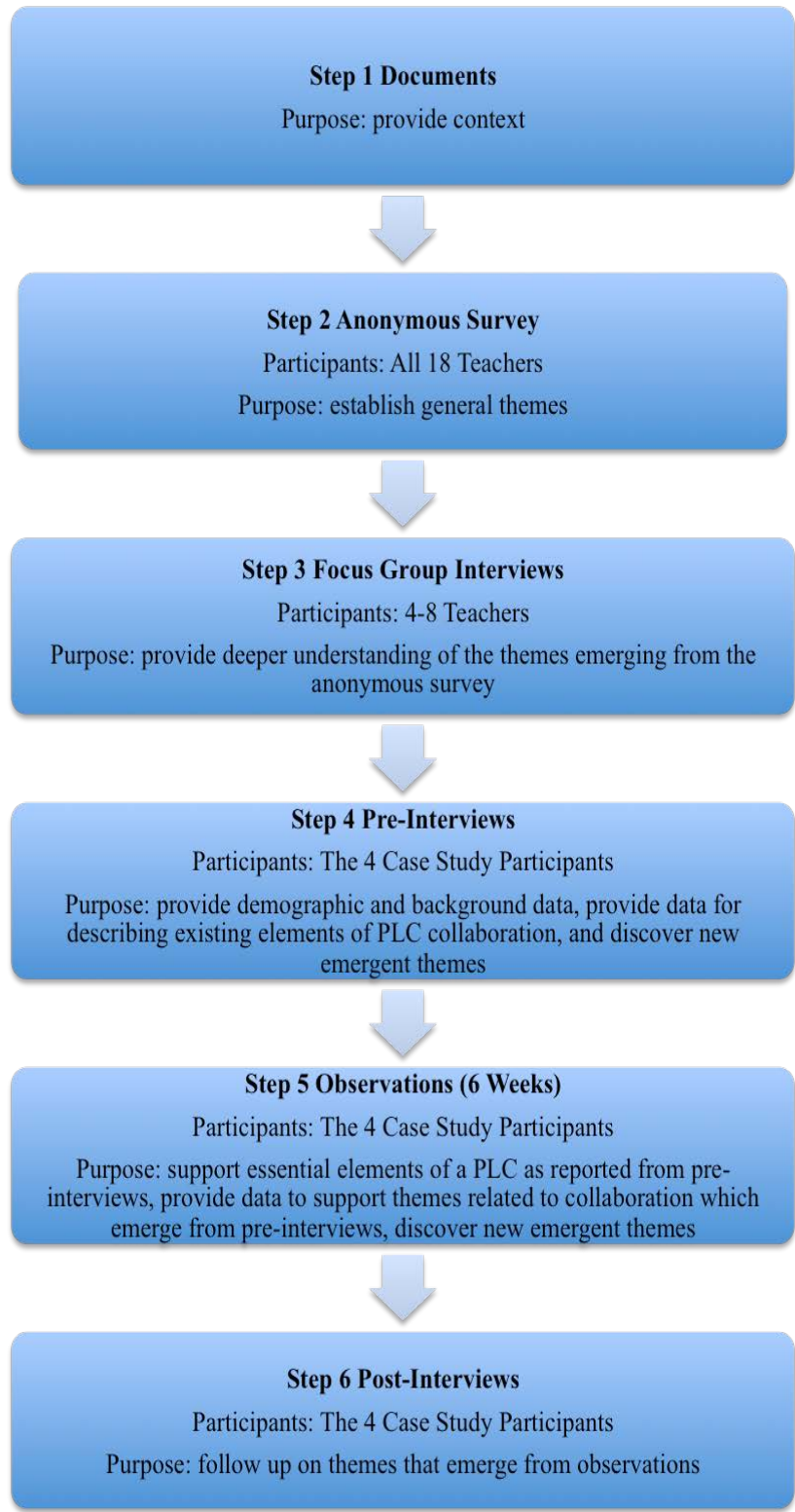
“Professional learning communities - in which collaboration and collegiality are supposed to play a key role - ought to be conceived of not so much as structural arrangements but rather as cultural and political environments in which those forms of collaboration and collegiality can take place that really contribute to pupils' learning, teacher development and quality of school improvement” (Kelchtermans, 2006, p. 234). When creating and sustaining

PLCs with intercultural teams, are the current structures adequate, or do other factors, such as cultural or political ideologies, also influence the level of collaboration? What are the challenges to collaboration faced by intercultural teams? How can administrators support collaboration in intercultural teaching teams within professional learning communities?

Methods of Data Collection

The study employed a six-step process for data collection (see Figure 1). A combination of documents, anonymous surveys, focus group interviews, pre-observation interviews, observations, and post-observation interviews were used. Though collective case study research designs usually include multiple sources of information to include documents, interviews and observations (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002), the data collection methods of an anonymous survey and focus group interviews were included in this research design, as the topic of intercultural PLCs is new to the literature. When interviewing and observing the four case study participants, it was felt there might be areas about which the four case study participants were either uncomfortable or unaware but which were nevertheless crucial for fully understanding the context of the case and for describing collaboration on an intercultural PLC. For this reason an anonymous survey and focus group interviews were also used to collect data. These two additional data collection methods provided an opportunity to further triangulate patterns in the data, as collaboration within intercultural PLCs has little support in the literature for comparison. This allowed the researcher to provide the most in-depth understanding and description of the context as possible.

Figure 1-Six Step Timeline



Data Analysis

Though each set of data was analyzed slightly differently, generally data were analyzed by reading and re-reading while highlighting key words or phrases, and then categorizing into themes or comparing to the literature. Numerous methods were used to strengthen the credibility of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. These methods include acknowledging researcher identity, triangulation of data collection, use of alternative explanations and negative case analysis, use of external analysts, and member checking.

Case Study Narrative

Understanding and appreciating this research study would not be possible without first explaining some of what makes the study participants who they are as people and as teachers. The four case study participants, Lan, Jieng-wei, Olivia and Emma (names are pseudonyms) were brought together through their collaborative work within an intercultural PLC at an IB World School though they have different cultural backgrounds, educational and teaching experiences, and English proficiency levels. Their individual values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, experiences, and behaviors shape their perceptions of this context.

Meet Lan.

Lan is Chinese and was born in a little village in Sichuan. She went to what she described as a very small country school with holes in the walls instead of windows, a dirt floor, and tables in poor condition. The teacher used chalk and a black board with a class of 20 to 30 students. “We would all sit at the table, face the teacher, and we would listen. There was no encouraging to do independent thinking, we just did what we were told.” One room held the four, five, and six year olds. “I still remember when the four year olds had the lesson, the five and six year olds

would turn from one side to the other side.” When Lan later went to what she described as a “big town countryside school,” each class had about 60 children.

Lan attended Sichuan University for her bachelor’s degree and then later attended East China Normal University, with a full scholarship, in the much larger city of Shanghai, where she earned a master’s of education degree majoring in pre-school education.

Lan’s first teaching job was at a private kindergarten in China. She taught 22 students her first year, which was also the first year the school was attempting to provide an international education by blending the local kindergarten curriculum in Chinese with some English instruction. During that time, she was the first to co-teach with a foreign teacher. She found the teaching challenging as she found the teaching ideas very different from what she learned at the university and from what she experienced as a little girl.

Though Lan was quickly promoted to an administrative position in the private kindergarten, she left the position to become a teaching assistant at an international school in Shanghai. When I asked her why, she explained first how she was struggling to make a living, as local teachers are not paid very much and she had to work other part-time jobs. Lan was making 2700CNY (\$436US) per month after taxes. As the only child, after paying her living expenses, she wanted to send money to her parents who live in a small village.

Lan then worked as a teaching assistant for an international school in Shanghai, which offered the International Baccalaureate’s (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) in English. The following year, she moved to a larger international school, her current school, also as a teaching assistant. She now works as a co-teacher sharing instructional responsibilities for her Pre-Kindergarten class of 16 students.

Meet Jieng-wei.

While in college, Jieng-wei enjoyed her part-time job as a teaching assistant so much that she changed her major to education and became a teacher. Jieng-wei proudly told me she was born and raised in Shanghai. After she graduated, she took a part-time job teaching Confucianism in a Chinese local school for grades Kindergarten through Grade 3 while also studying at the Shanghai Normal University for an Early Years Teaching Certificate. She described the Chinese local school classroom environment as consisting of a teacher sitting at a large desk with a computer and 30 to 40 students with individual desks and chairs. She taught Confucianism through songs, games, Chinese characters, and stories. The children sat at their desks in rows with their hands behind their back to help them pay attention. Jieng-wei smiled and laughed as she rolled her head around in circles, showing me how students would roll their heads while reading the Confucian texts.

After she earned an Early Years Teaching Certificate, Jieng-wei found full-time work at an international PYP school in Shanghai. She taught Chinese and was a teaching assistant for a kindergarten class of approximately 10 students. Jieng-wei then became a co-teacher at a larger international PYP school. Jieng-wei said her favorite part of being a teacher was the pride. “When you’re teaching something and they quickly pick it or something you want to, they learn, that’s making you feel so proud of them, and so happy, also about yourself.”

Jieng-wei also owns a restaurant with her boyfriend, at which she spends considerable time after school hours. Along with her full-time teaching job, the restaurant keeps her extremely busy. She smiled, saying, “It’s fine for me.”

Meet Olivia.

Olivia is an American who grew up in San Francisco, California. She went to a private Chinese/Christian school from preschool through Grade 5, a private French/Catholic school for

Grades 6-8, and then to a public high school. She remembered class sizes being from 20 to 33 students.

She went to San Francisco State University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Child Development with the concentration of Young Children and Family. She continued at San Francisco State University to earn a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education.

Olivia's master's thesis focused on her one and one-half month long volunteer work in Chengdu, China at a public kindergarten, demonstrating what inquiry looks like in a play-based curriculum as part of an ongoing San Francisco State University project with Chengdu principals.

Having fallen in love with international education and having recently finished her graduate degree, Olivia joined her current international school in Shanghai this year. Her favorite part of being a teacher is the research side. "I love sharing my work and I love presenting, sharing with other educators what I found," she says.

Meet Emma.

"When I was doing my first degree, I volunteered in an elementary school once a week for three years and I really loved it, so that's when I knew that I wanted to teach," said Emma, a Canadian who was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta.

Emma earned her bachelor's degree majoring in honors History from the University of Western Ontario in Ontario, Canada. Emma earned her second bachelor's degree majoring in elementary education from the University of Alberta.

Though Emma was educated in Canada, she never taught in her home country. Her first teaching job was at a Canadian Islamic school in Saudi Arabia. During her first year, she taught kindergarten with both boys and girls in her class. The following year, she taught a class of 18

Grade 1 boys, as boys and girls were educated in separate classrooms from Grade 1 through Grade 3. The school had a special exemption to have both girls and boys in the same school. At her school, men were not allowed during working hours. Then at Grade 4, the boys would go to a separate school where girls and women were not allowed. Though she missed teaching the girls, she said she learned a lot about classroom management having a room full of boys with no co-teacher and only an assistant a couple of hours a week.

After two years in Saudi Arabia, Emma taught kindergarten, with a teaching assistant, for two years in an IB World School offering the PYP in Wushi, China. During her first year, her class had 20 students and during her second year her class had 14 students. Living in a city in China with few other expats and working at a small school where she was the only teacher at her grade level made life difficult for Emma. Though she worked on a team, the teachers did not have collaborative meetings.

Wanting to continue her IB experience and to learn and improve with the PYP in a larger school, Emma joined her current international school in Shanghai. Her grade level team of one increased to a grade level team of six teachers and three assistants with the move, "...which was a bit of a struggle, but it has been good."

She described the best parts of being a teacher as being with the kids, watching them learn, especially when they suddenly understand after struggling, and realizing at the end of the year how far everybody had come.

Summary and Discussion of the Results

A summary and discussion of the results is organized by research question and then by major themes.

Research question 1-What experiences do these teachers have collaborating in an intercultural professional learning community at this school?

Define collaboration.

Collaboration on an intercultural PLC was defined by Early Years teachers at this school as when team members (1) share the responsibilities, (2) learn from each other, (3) establish a positive culture, (4) support each other, and (5) are focused on the same student learning goals. First, collaboration is when the team shares such responsibilities as leading or coordinating the team and administrative work. Second, team members learn from each other by exchanging ideas, modeling, coaching, and teaching each other. Third, a team collaborates by establishing a positive culture of respect, open-mindedness, and compromise. Fourth, team members are supported emotionally and professionally. And fifth, all teachers on the team are focused on the same student learning goals.

DuFour mentions five points about collaboration within a PLC (2004). The first is in regard to membership and participation. The intercultural PLC of which the case study participants were part comprised six teachers who worked together. The team met DuFour's second point regarding regular meeting times, as they met for two hours every week during the school day. Third, the team focused their efforts on learning, including planning for each class in relation to the current unit of inquiry, English language instruction, Chinese language instruction, mathematics, teaching of social skills, simply planning curriculum, sharing advice, and providing professional development for members of the team. The roles, responsibilities, and relationships were defined in accordance with DuFour's fourth point. They accomplished this through written meeting guidelines, job descriptions, essential agreements, and roles and responsibilities documents. This intercultural PLC met DuFour's fifth point regarding collaboration within a

PLC by focusing on student achievement goals. The goals included reviewing achievement in reading, writing, and within the unit of inquiry, moderating writing samples, setting behavior goals, planning assessments, and documenting and reporting student achievement to other teachers on the team.

Research question 2-What are the successes of collaboration in this context?

Teachers described the opportunity for professional development as one advantage to being on an intercultural team, including (1) *learning about other teaching styles, methods, and philosophies*, (2) *learning about other cultures, perspectives, and opinions*, and (3) *reflecting on own culture and teaching practices*. The purpose of collaboration is not simply to do things together but to improve both our professional practice and the learning for our students (DuFour, 2011). When citing learning about other teaching styles, methods, and philosophies, teachers provided examples of learning about traditional Chinese instructional methods, Western mathematics instruction ideas carrying over into Chinese language lessons, and discovering deep questioning techniques. Teachers also mentioned learning about other cultures, perspectives, and opinions. Some examples were the priority of the needs of one versus the needs of the group, parent communication being dependent on the nationality of parents, physical risk-taking acceptance levels, gender roles, and cultural celebrations. Being on an intercultural PLC also caused some teachers to reflect on their own culture and teaching practices when exposed to differences.

Research question 3 & 4-What are the challenges to collaboration in this context and how are they addressed?

Both being on an intercultural team and collaboration presented challenges. Disadvantages were described as *difficulties working with different cultures, expectations, and*

opinions as well as *difficulties with communication*. Challenges to collaboration included *sharing responsibilities, communication, colleagues' motivation, colleagues' skill level, and time*.

Disadvantages to being on an intercultural team.

Two themes emerged in regard to the disadvantages of being on an intercultural team. The first theme was *difficulties working with different cultures, expectations, and opinions*. One example concerned the amount of communication a teacher provided being dependent on the nationality of the parent. A Chinese teacher felt Chinese parents would expect much more communication compared to the non-Chinese parents, based on her experiences in Chinese schools. Another example was the differing opinions regarding the appropriate use of cell phones at a team meeting. In addition, different levels of expectations for taking initiative were also noted. The second theme was *difficulties with communication*. Some teachers noted differences in expectations for what constituted appropriate teacher-student interaction, for example, talking down to students or getting down to talk with students. Difficulties with communication also occurred in communications with parents.

Challenges to collaboration.

During the research, five themes emerged which were related to challenges to collaboration within the intercultural PLC. When interviewing the case study participants after the observations, I asked them to comment on the challenges within their grade level team and co-teaching team separately. Sometimes different challenges were found depending on the type of team.

The first theme was *sharing the responsibilities*. In the grade level team, challenges to collaboration included a perceived reluctance to volunteer and the resultant tendency of the foreign teacher, with the first language of English, to take on more of the responsibilities

compared to the Chinese teachers. However, some responsibilities were evenly distributed with rotating schedules for routine matters like hosting a visiting student or coordinating the grade level meeting, and some responsibilities were shared for a particular unit of inquiry. Within the co-teaching teams, responsibilities were not perceived as being evenly distributed. For example, teaching English phonics, creating portfolios, and writing reports were perceived as the Western teacher's responsibility.

Communication was the second theme in challenges to collaboration. In the grade level teams, discussions were noted as taking too long, causing some teachers in the team to withdraw. In the co-teaching pairs, communication was a challenge, as neither teacher could fully express herself to her co-teacher.

The third challenge to collaboration within this intercultural team aligned with the theme of *colleague's motivation*. A colleague's perceived lack of motivation could have caused the impression that making decisions within the grade level team took too long, but the motivation could be wanting to make a timely decision versus wanting to do what is best for the students. In the co-teaching pairs, it was uncertain if a colleague's laid-back style was the result of motivation or personality.

A colleague's skill level presented a fourth challenge to collaboration while also presenting a benefit to collaboration. In the grade level team, some teachers felt challenges to collaboration were due to the different experiences and skills of the teachers on the team. However, the different experiences also had the benefit that teachers contributed different skills to the team. Similarly, within the co-teaching pairs, differences in skill level provided challenges and benefits to collaboration. Though the foreign teachers were noted as having to take on more responsibilities which require skill or proficiency in English, like writing reports, completing

paperwork, or teaching phonics, one teacher mentioned that the different skill level of her co-teacher was an inspiration to her.

The fifth theme for challenges to collaboration was *time*. Two of the four case study participants felt time for collaboration was not an issue due to the provision of a two-hour weekly grade level collaborative meeting, while the other two case study participants felt that sometimes the time was not used efficiently. Conflicting views on time were also apparent within the co-teaching pairs. One case study participant felt that time was a challenge for her, as she had to administer the assessments, write the reports, and complete other paperwork, when compared to her co-teacher. The other three case study participants felt that time was not a challenge within the co-teaching teams and noted the essential agreements made by the co-teaching teams as facilitating the effective use of time.

For collaboration during a grade level meeting to be possible, participation from all team members is the ideal. Four themes emerged from observations and interviews which describe what participation in a grade level meeting was dependent on: (1) *topic of conversation*, (2) *confidence in the language used for the conversation*, (3) *contributions of others in the conversation*, and (4) *encouragement from others to share and contribute*. The topic of the conversation affected teachers' participation. Comments and observations were commonly made about Chinese teachers effectively participating in conversations about Chinese language lessons, but noting that they were less likely to participate in conversations about all other subjects. Confidence with English and the ability to comprehend fast conversations was also observed and mentioned as affecting participation in grade level meetings. Sometimes a few, two, or even just one person dominated the conversations. At times, when one teacher wanted to contribute, another teacher interrupted, visibly affecting the first teacher's level of participation

afterwards. Instances of teachers trying to encourage other teachers to participate in discussions were also observed and commented on. Sometimes the encouragement was in the form of praise about what was said and other times in the form of asking the teacher if they had anything they wished to share.

Research question 5-What factors support collaboration in this context?

Five themes emerged in regard to supporting collaboration within an intercultural PLC, (1) *having collaborative planning meetings*, (2) *communicating expectations and agreements*, (3) *building a respectful culture*, (4) *understanding each other* and (5) *supporting each other*.

In this study, the weekly, two-hour long, collaborative meetings with the PYP Curriculum Coordinator were mentioned often as supporting collaboration. Having honest communication and using the *Co-Teacher Discussion Questions* to facilitate communication was also mentioned as supporting collaboration. Building a respectful culture was a theme, involving talking and laughing together as relationships developed. Another theme was understanding each other. Examples included sharing personal details about weekend leisure time or about how a newly adopted cat is doing. Finally, the importance of supporting each other emotionally and professionally was recognized as a theme. Some examples included support from the PYP Curriculum Coordinator, Grade Level Coordinator, collegial emotional support during moments of stress, or offers to cover someone's supervision duty when work pressures were overwhelming.

Major Themes Across All Research Questions

When the themes from each of the research questions were analyzed, three major themes emerged. The major themes from this study are *communication*, *learning*, and *working together*.

Communication.

Communication was noted as a disadvantage, a challenge, and a factor negatively affecting participation in grade level meetings. Teachers noted disadvantages due to different expectations for the appropriate way to communicate with students and differences when communicating with parents. Communication was also noted as a challenge when discussions during grade level meetings were perceived as taking too long, causing some teachers to withdraw. With the co-teacher relationships, sometimes teachers felt it was a challenge to fully express themselves to their co-teacher due to differences in English proficiency. With the grade level meetings, confidence in English and ability to comprehend fast conversations in English negatively affected participation in discussions. At other times, the contributions of a few, a couple, or one teacher in the conversation hindered the participation of others.

However, communication also was noted as a positive theme in connection with participation in grade level meetings, supporting collaboration, and providing advice to others on the team. Teachers encouraged each other to communicate during the meetings through praise and invited others to contribute to the discussion. Collaboration was supported through communication with team members, especially with the use of the *Co-Teacher Discussion Questions 2014-2015*. Communicating honestly, respectfully, and with an open mind helped the collaborative relationships grow.

Learning.

Learning was a major theme as teachers learned about themselves and others. When team members took the time to learn about each other—not just about teaching styles and beliefs, but about who the colleague was as a person—that knowledge built stronger relationships which then supported collaborative practices. Much of the advice guiding collaboration on intercultural teams related to learning. It was recommended by case study participants that teachers should

learn about their colleagues professionally and personally as well as learn about different cultures, perspectives, and opinions. Learning was also a theme as teachers reflected on their own culture and teaching practices.

Working together.

The most common major theme, *working together*, was both positive and negative. Working together on an intercultural team was seen as enriching the educational experience of the children. However, it was also seen as a disadvantage due to the difficulties of working with colleagues from different cultures. Working together posed challenges regarding unequal distribution of responsibilities and perceived levels of a colleague's motivation, skill, and time. Working together supported collaboration through collaborative meetings, a respectful culture, supporting each other and making agreements.

Summary.

The findings of this study suggest that though there are advantages and disadvantages to working collaboratively, and there are successes and challenges with communication, intercultural PLCs provide many opportunities for teachers to learn. Working together means sharing responsibilities while working through difficulties arising from different cultural practices, expectations, opinions, motivations, and skill levels, all the while constrained by time. Sometimes communication was difficult, restrained by a lack of self-confidence, or stifled by others. But at other times colleagues, who want honest, respectful, and open-minded relationships, facilitated communication through praise and encouragement. Students may have benefited, as teachers improved their own instructional practices after having learned about their colleague's different teaching styles, methods, philosophies, cultures, perspectives, and opinions.

Learning about other cultures and practices prompted some teachers to reflect on their own culture and practices.

Implications for Practice

Collaborating within a mono-cultural PLC is already a challenge, but for teachers like Lan, Jieng-wei, Emma, and Olivia, collaborating within an intercultural PLC provides unique and difficult challenges. The implications for a school wanting to start an intercultural PLC, or which already has an intercultural PLC, are many. The findings suggest practical recommendations when working within intercultural teams or within intercultural co-teaching arrangements: (1) Develop the relationships, (2) Set weekly meeting times, (3) Make agreements, (4) Learn from each other, (5) Reflect, and (6) Support from school leaders.

Develop the relationships.

Build a respectful school culture which nurtures professional, personal, and collaborative relationships, facilitated through honest and respectful communication and based on a foundation of trust. These relationships will allow teachers to know each other and learn how to support each other. Teachers need to keep an open mind and accept differences as they learn about other cultures, teaching styles, and perspectives. Relationships can be developed by facilitating communication through the use of pre-determined questions to ask each other, sharing about oneself, and engaging in social opportunities.

Set weekly meeting times.

Set dedicated collaborative meeting times weekly. The findings suggest that the most important factor in supporting successful collaborative meetings is the provision of dedicated meeting times for both co-teacher meetings and larger grade levels meetings.

Make agreements.

Define roles and responsibilities and make essential agreements. Expectations for the roles and responsibilities of PLC members must be agreed upon and documented to include grade level coordinators, curriculum coordinators, teachers and assistants. This is especially important in an intercultural team, as members could bring significantly different expectations. Essential agreements should include working within the grade level team, collaborating during meetings, and collaborating within co-teaching arrangements.

Learn from each other.

Learn from the educational and training experiences of others on your intercultural team. Some of the advantages of being on an intercultural team are the cultural and professional learning opportunities available from colleagues. Teachers should observe other teacher's lessons, discuss perceptions, philosophies, and approaches to teaching, offer advice and accept feedback, and provide learning opportunities by sharing professional practice through presentations and workshops. For example, case study participants commented on how they were inspired by learning instructional methods or philosophies that were sometimes the opposite of those they were used to, such as whole class instruction versus differentiation and the needs of the group versus the needs of the individual student.

Reflect.

Reflect on how well the intercultural team is collaborating and adjust as needed. Essential agreements are not just for the beginning of the year, they are for the whole year. It will be necessary for teachers to review the co-teaching team and PLC team agreements throughout the year to assess how well the agreements are working, especially if everyone is new to working together. Upon reflection, areas needing adjustment, additional support, or growth should be identified and targeted for additional support.

Support.

School leaders need to support teachers in building a collaborative culture. Building and sustaining intercultural collaborative teams will require much support from school leaders due to the many difficult challenges these teams present. After hiring teachers who believe collaboration is beneficial and understand established policies and expectations, the process continues for school leaders by supporting teachers as they work through the first 5 practical recommendations already mentioned.

At the beginning of the year, and throughout the year, school leaders need to provide opportunities for teachers to socialize and develop relationships. Relationships are based on trust and built with communication and shared experiences.

To further support teachers in building a collaborative culture, school leaders need to adjust the master schedule as needed in order to provide time for teaching teams and co-teaching teams to meet and collaborate during the school day. They must also facilitate the making and documenting of essential agreements within co-teaching and PLC teams at the beginning of the year as well as reflecting on and adjusting these agreements throughout the year. The agreements should include details on sharing responsibilities.

School leaders can also support collaboration by providing professional learning opportunities on collaboration and cultural understanding for the whole team, internally or from outside experts. Whole-team professional learning opportunities can facilitate common approaches to teaching and cultural understanding, especially in co-teaching teams where teachers share responsibilities all day in the same classroom. For example, whole-faculty discussions can follow some pre-made cultural comparison presentations found on the Internet. These presentations can illustrate perceptions of individualism versus collectivism, polite

communication, how to talk to or with students, the role of the teacher and students in a classroom, and other areas. Even though some pre-made cultural presentations only compare two “cultures,” for example the host “Chinese” culture and foreign “Western” culture, the presentation can be used to start discussions about what each teacher feels is appropriate from their cultural perspective by saying if they align closely with one perception presented or have an alternative view. These discussions can help develop further cultural understanding on an intercultural team. In the international school setting, presentations and discussion of the host culture in particular would be especially helpful in developing cultural understanding and building collaborative relationships.

School leaders can also provide support by offering opportunities for teachers to learn from each other through observing other classes, sharing a presentation or workshop, or working on projects like curriculum or assessment planning together. These opportunities can facilitate the sharing of perceptions, approaches to teaching, philosophies, and ideas, and in some cases, can facilitate agreement.

In addition, school leaders should provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their collaborative relationships by giving opportunities to share within their co-teaching teams, grade level or subject teams. Teams and school leaders should also discuss their perceptions of how well the teams are working, what areas they feel could use additional support, and how additional support can be provided. School leaders should be aware of how well the collaborative relationships are working and provide support as needed as teachers may not be able to overcome the unique challenges of working on an intercultural team on their own.

Recommendations For Further Research

As the number of participants used was based on the need for an in-depth understanding of the unique context and the different perspectives of the participants, the findings of this study will add to the research base but are not intended to be generalizable. The findings merely offer an insight into this particular intercultural PLC context. It is hoped this research will lead to a greater understanding of collaborative relationships and how school leaders can foster these and other collaborative relationships for the benefit of teacher learning and ultimately student learning. As many international schools have intercultural PLCs, more research is needed to understand the experiences and perceptions of other intercultural PLC members regarding the advantages and disadvantages to being on an intercultural team, the successes and challenges of collaborating, and factors that support collaboration within an intercultural PLC.

Final Thoughts

The effectiveness of PLCs depends on the ability of educators to collaborate. Collaborating within a mono-cultural PLC is already a challenge, but for teachers like Lan, Jieng-wei, Emma, and Olivia, collaborating within an intercultural PLC provides unique and difficult challenges. Understanding the challenges within an intercultural PLC and providing appropriate support will facilitate efforts to collaborate with the ultimate goal of improving student learning through teacher learning.

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Vita

Greg Brunton is currently the Director at the Western International School of Shanghai (WISS) in China. He previously worked at an IB school in Tokyo and started his education career at a public school in the USA. Greg received his doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, USA. His work in international environments comprised of teachers of different nationalities and who have different cultural backgrounds, educational and teaching experiences, and proficiencies with English inspired this research.