Professional Learning Community in Marina Secondary School

Marina Secondary School is located in the southern part of Singapore. In addition to a Principal of five years, Marina has two Vice-Principals, a School Staff Developer (SSD), 10 Middle Managers (MMs), 10 Teacher Leaders (Senior Teachers/Lead Teachers) and a total of 100 staff. The school's mission statement reads "To Nurture Critical Thinkers, Compassionate Leaders and Lifelong Learners who Aspire to be Active and Responsible Citizens of Sound Character."

The school's PLC directions for the year focused on research based pedagogical practices that enhanced the joy of learning. Marina called itself a "Learning Family", committed towards staff and student learning. All staff were involved in data-driven conversations that led to collaboration, shared responsibility, and accountability. This, in turn, fostered inclusive leadership and a culture that strived for high-quality teaching and learning.

Although teaching and learning (T&L) was driven by a T&L committee comprising school leaders, the SSD and teacher leaders, Marina involved all staff in the decision making process when it came to T&L in PLC. Marina held two review meetings, in May and September, annually. The school endeavoured to co-construct a shared and aligned PLC direction with their staff via these two touch points. The T&L committee utilised the meeting in May to gather feedback from staff on T&L matters as well as the progress of their PLTs. School leaders, MMs and teacher leaders used the feedback to set directions for PLC for the subsequent year. The finalised PLC direction were then communicated and shared to all staff in December.

Through this review process, it was surfaced that Marina's staff were indeed focused on levelling up their competencies, which were aligned with the school's strategic thrust of "Developing competent and engaged Marina staff". This guided the various departments to chart their own department's PLTs' T&L focus for the year. As a result, PLTs identified T&L gaps while ensuring that there was alignment to the overall department and school vision, and PLC direction. This was done through a thorough examination of student learning via various modes of assessment.

PLT member, Mel shared how PLT leaders and members scanned for research articles related to their T&L focus in their various PLTs and shared their insights based on these articles with each another during PLT meetings. PLT leader, Emily elaborated that by engaging in literature review, the PLT was able to forge a common understanding of chosen pedagogies as interventions for their classroom practices. Both Mel and Emily agreed that while PLT leaders were responsible for sourcing for research articles, all leaders and members collectively brainstormed for pedagogical practices to implement and conduct literature review. Next, PLTs used some of the ideas and tools learned from these articles to enact selected pedagogies in their classrooms. Thereafter, PLT leaders and members analysed peer feedback and students' work, to ascertain the effectiveness of the classroom strategies. In addition, staff implemented pre- and post-tests where necessary, to assess the impact of these strategies examined.

The PLC was organised by department (subject/discipline-based) then by level. Hence, each department participated in one Professional Learning Team (PLT). The grouping of PLTs by department and/or subject was well received. Carol, the SSD, shared that the PLT grouping provided opportunities to implement authentic and relevant pedagogical strategies in the classroom. When a ST/LT is grouped with the Beginning Teacher (BT) in the same PLT, it served as a natural platform for mentoring of the BT. Through this PLT structure, mentoring became subject-specific and BTs had more opportunities to observe the STs/LTs' lessons. Staff also surfaced the possibility of having interest-based PLTs during the mid-year review, which the T&L committee shared that they would consider for the following year.

In Marina, the school leaders and SSD identified the Critical Inquiry (CI) methods to be used by the school's PLC. Action Research (AR) was one of the inquiry method that the school had implemented. However, most staff opined that AR was too onerous for PLTs to use as their inquiry cycle. Acting on this feedback, Carol sought alternative CI methods which would adequately assist her staff in PLC. Subsequently, she completed a Lesson Study (LS) online module designed by the Academy of Singapore Teachers. As LS was more directed towards lesson and peer observations, she and the T&L committee decided to introduce it to their staff instead. The school engaged external stakeholders to conduct a two-day workshop on LS using Staff Professional Development Grant. Staff could also tap on this grant for their PLT inquiry.

The lesson observations in LS within PLC were coined as "Open Classroom" by Marina. Carol shared that at least one week was dedicated to open classroom in the first half of the year. In Marina, open classrooms were first led by MMs and STs/LTs as they were expected to role-model T&L. In second half of the year, staff were encouraged to take the lead to open their classrooms to their peers. Staff were not confined to observing peers from their own departments but were given the liberty to observe any lesson of their interest as pedagogy was the main focus. As the STs/LTs were grouped with the BTs in their PLTs, it was a professional development opportunity to mentor the BTs on pedagogical practices through these open classrooms as well. PLT leader, Amy commented that a standardised rubric, designed by STs/LTs, consisting of pre- and post-lesson observation sections, a checklist of indicators and an open-ended section were used for observation and feedback through the open classrooms. These observations and feedback were deemed as developmental and meaningful by the staff.

In Marina, staff were generally satisfied with the weekly time-tabled time every Tuesday morning and the autonomy given to their PLTs. However, Melissa, a PLT member shared that some PLTs met at least twice a week for PLC as timetabled time were used for non-PLC matters. Despite structured time allocated for PLC and open classrooms, some PLTs still requested for more time to meet as they had many ideas to discuss and implement.

With regard to autonomy, Carol felt that the mid-year review for PLC gave PLT leaders and members an avenue for their voices to be heard. For example, the humanities department, expressed their preference for using Learning Circle rather than LS— a move which the school supported. Another area the staff desired more autonomy in, was the choice of PLT leader. Staff expressed that less experienced staff could be given an opportunity to lead their PLTs. However, Carol shared that STs/LTs or

aspiring STs were chosen as PLT leaders as they were stronger in pedagogy and were more capable in leading learning in their respective PLTs. This was a collective decision made by the T&L committee in consultation with school leaders. The committee believed in allowing less experienced staff more time to focus on T&L so that they could learn from their more experienced colleagues and hone their craft. With this feedback, the committee decided that less experienced staff who were interested to lead PLTs could shadow current PLT leaders, and they would be considered for the role of PLT leader when they were deemed to be ready. Carol was encouraged by the young staff's eagerness to lead PLTs and highlighted it as an exemplification of the school's culture of daring to take risks.

Staff culture played a significant role in shaping learning communities within Marina. Staff reported that they enjoyed collegial, respectful and trustful relationships within their departments and across the school. The PLTs were also given professional opportunities to share their PLT inquiry within and beyond school at various platforms. In addition, Melissa commented that if a PLT had failed, it was not held against them although the PLT might be asked to rethink and try again. This denotes PLC as a process of collective and continual learning.