Article

Professional Learning Communities in Chinese Preschools: Challenging Western Frameworks

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Abstract: In the education field, professional learning communities (PLCs) are regarded as an effective method for fostering professional development for teachers, enhancing student learning and achievement, and promoting school reform. Quality leadership and management are understood to be essential for schools to become effective PLCs. Mainly proposed by Western scholars, existing PLC frameworks explicitly or implicitly assume that PLCs should be initiated and led by teachers themselves, following a bottom-up approach. The goal of this conceptual overview paper is to challenge certain taken-for-granted core principles of Western PLC frameworks by analyzing the current approach to PLCs adopted by preschools in mainland China, which follow a top-down leadership and management approach. We review multiple research streams, including policy frameworks and regulations, as well as the most relevant conceptual, theoretical, and empirical studies published in recent years. After reviewing China’s core socio-cultural traditional values, we describe the recent policies that have mandated the establishment and implementation of PLCs in Chinese preschools. We then review several recent studies that demonstrate that, despite profound differences to Western frameworks, PLCs in Chinese preschools are effective in benefitting teachers and highly regarded by the relevant stakeholders. The literature shows that Chinese preschools enact culturally situated versions of PLCs, characterized by some standard PLC principles (e.g., shared vision, collaboration, and collective responsibility) alongside features that resonate with Confucian values (e.g., strong hierarchical structure, guidance of external experts, internal leadership support, and greater emphasis on ecological support rather than personal agency and autonomy). We conclude that Chinese preschools merit international attention, as their approach to leadership and management allow us to reconsider certain core principles of Western PLC frameworks. Future directions for PLC policy and practice are suggested.

Keywords: professional learning communities; preschool education; professional development; leadership; management; China

1. Introduction: Western Frameworks of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) of Teachers

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are regarded as an effective method for fostering professional development for teachers, enhancing student learning and achievement, and promoting school reform [1–3]. While multiple definitions and conceptualizations have been proposed in the English-language scholarly literature [4,5], existing frameworks have characterized teacher PLCs as voluntary and loosely organized learning organizations. In them, teachers with common purposes and goals take the initiative to share and critically interrogate their practice in a continuous, reflective, cooperative, and growth-oriented manner, often supported by professionals external to their schools [6,7]. It is assumed that quality leadership and management are essential for schools to become effective PLCs [5].

A large body of research on PLCs has emerged in Western countries during the past 30 years. Western scholars have argued that effective teacher PLCs share some interrelated...
characteristics, including shared goals and values, mutual accountability, collective reflection, and a collaborative culture [4,8]. To be sustainable over time, it is understood that PLCs should emerge bottom-up and focus on teachers’ own interests, thereby promoting empowerment and self-determination [9]. Other features such as “coherence, sustainability, professional learning integrated into daily work, risk-taking, and professional development scheme results assessment” ([10], p. 49) have also been frequently emphasized in the PLC literature. School leaders and managers have been encouraged to create the ideal conditions to facilitate such working dynamics among teachers [11].

Western PLC frameworks value teacher initiative and democracy, encourage spontaneous collaboration and voluntary participation, and pose that the process of cultural and pedagogical change in schools should be led by teachers themselves [4,5]. Teacher authority and autonomy are considered core elements. Their personal interests, needs, and motivations are prioritized over the agenda of the school leaders, or even the mission and goals of the school [1–3]. It is understood that PLCs are more successful when teachers control their own learning and developmental processes, and that this sense of ownership leads to an enhanced teaching and learning culture [12]. Feelings of trust and belonging have been reported by the teachers who participate voluntarily in PLCs [13]. However, it is worth noting that some studies conducted in the West have identified superficial levels of teacher collaboration [14], suggesting that some teachers may be unsure about the benefits of spending time meeting and collaborating with their colleagues [15].

While there appears to be a general consensus regarding the features of effective teacher PLCs among the global scholarly community, which is predominantly Anglocentric, there are still several important questions that remain unanswered. These questions pertain to the Western perspective on PLCs and whether it is devoid of cultural values and contextual realities. Additionally, there is a need to explore alternative approaches to PLCs, specifically within the realm of preschool education. This conceptual overview paper responds to these needs. Conceptual overview papers draw on multiple research streams (conceptual and theoretical studies, empirical research, policy frameworks, etc.) to provide a general panorama of a particular educational topic [16]. These papers present syntheses of existing knowledge and often support an alternative position on a topic, based on scholarly sources and credible facts that ensure the validity of the claims [17].

The goal of this conceptual overview paper is to challenge certain taken-for-granted core principles of Western PLC frameworks by analyzing the current approach to PLC adopted by preschools in mainland China. The paper is structured into four sections. In the first section, we review the core socio-cultural values of traditional Chinese societies. The second section describes several policies and regulations that have recently mandated the establishment and implementation of PLCs in Chinese preschools. In the third section, we review a body of conceptual, qualitative, and quantitative studies which demonstrate that, despite fundamental differences to Western approaches, PLCs in Chinese preschools are well implemented, highly effective in benefitting teachers, and well received by the relevant stakeholders. The final section concludes that Chinese preschools merit international attention, as their approach to PLCs allows us to reconsider the taken-for-granted core principles of Western frameworks. We also discuss the implications of this case for the future direction of PLC policies and practices in China, across other Asian countries, and internationally.

2. China: Traditional Values and Structures in a Rapidly Evolving Society

This section describes the general context in which the present conceptual overview paper is situated. The People’s Republic of China (henceforth, China) is the most populous country in the world, and one of the largest in terms of its territory. While in recent decades, China has undergone a period of rapid modernization and sociocultural transformation [18], the country is rooted in its long history and profoundly traditional culture. To contextualize the policies and research studies presented in subsequent sections, it is important for readers to understand the core socio-cultural values of traditional Chinese societies, not specifically
in relation to teachers but more generally. Since ancient times, Chinese societies have embraced the traditional Confucian values of collectivism, harmony, and self-perfection, which are viewed as prerequisites for the correct operation of this nation. As explained below, these Confucian values have resulted in hierarchical social structures characterized by the worship of authority, obedience, and the search for harmonious and balanced relationships [19,20].

Collectivism (Ji ti zhù yì) in China, derived from both Confucianism and Communism, is a value system that places importance on shared objectives, mutual reliance, and group unity as means of fostering optimal collaboration among individuals within a collective setting [21]. Collectivism has been defined as “a set of feelings, beliefs, behavioral intentions, and behaviors related to solidarity and concern for others” ([22], p. 44). Chinese societies bind individuals in groups based on common preferences or interests, expecting them to achieve harmony and mutual agreement in their practices [23]. It is understood that the development of strong emotional links facilitates the adoption of shared responsibilities, duties, and obligations for the benefit of the group [24]. The value of collectivism is in stark contrast with the Western value of individualism, which prioritizes the interests and motivations of the individual and fosters personal independence as opposed to interdependence [25].

Another traditional value that guides Chinese societies is harmony (He), which allows people to maintain balanced favorable relationships and avoid conflict in personal interactions [20]. Confucianism presupposes the existence of differences within social groups (e.g., between family members, friends, colleagues, and strangers). However, the expectation of preserving harmonious interpersonal relationships makes sharing and respect for others more likely to be cherished and attained [26]. When faced with conflicts in social settings, Chinese people tend to understand differences and resolve conflicts promptly, prioritizing the harmony and balance of the group over individual interests or needs [20].

A third core value of Confucianism is the pursuit of self-perfection (Zi wo wán shàn), which motivates people to learn and become better selves [27]. The five main purposes of learning in the Confucian philosophy include aims to “perfect oneself morally and socially, acquire knowledge/skills for oneself, establish oneself economically, gain social status/honor, and contribute to society” ([28], p. 49). In fact, Confucianism regards the ability to make social contributions as the highest and ultimate goal of human self-improvement, believing that people who make such contributions should be socially rewarded. Accomplished through a lifelong personal commitment to academic, social, and moral learning, the value of self-perfection has a far-reaching impact on Chinese learners, keeping them humble, reflective, and respectful of sources of knowledge [29].

These three core values have strongly influenced China’s contemporary hierarchical social system, characterized by people’s adoration of and respect for authority figures [27]. Hierarchical relationships such as “father-son, emperor-subject, husband-wife, elder-younger, friend-friend relationships” are believed to serve as the glue of social harmony ([19], p. 98). In China, hierarchies enable members of social groups to understand and respect differences, care for others, and learn to follow top-down instructions [20,30]. This culture of respect for authority and obedience allows the social system to function efficiently and predictably. The same top-down leadership and management approach is observable regarding national administration and policy implementation [31,32]. Similar to other Asian societies, governance systems in China can be thought of as nested and structured pyramids, with policies and mandates following a cascading downward management [33].

Despite the strong influence of the ancient belief system of Confucianism, China is embracing global trends and evolving rapidly [18]. In the past four decades, China has become increasingly modernized and linked to the world economy. Cities are heavily commercialized and corporatized, having experienced a rapid technological development [34]. Chinese people are more and more open and receptive to the rest of the world, including Western countries. They have the freedom to travel overseas, obtain an overseas education, and (with restrictions) use the Internet and social media platforms that expose them to
foreign cultures and values. As a result, there is currently a clear divide in social attitudes and social mindsets between the old and young, as well as between rural and urban citizens, with the former valuing the traditional culture and trying to preserve and uphold it, whereas the latter tend to be more accepting of progressive ideals [34]. Thus, the culture in contemporary China may be characterized as a unique combination of embedded traditions and rapid modernization [27].

Chinese people have combined tradition with modernity by creating hybrid models and approaches in fields such as science, technology, economy, and also education, as discussed in this article [35]. The PLC policies described in the following section constitute an interesting hybrid for teachers at the preschool education level.

3. Educational Policies in China: Mandating Preschool Teachers to Engage in PLCs

In China, preschool PLC policies and regulations have been influenced by prior policies and regulations for higher educational levels. Primary and secondary school teachers in this country have engaged in collaborative learning for more than seven decades, specifically within the context of teachers’ research groups (TRGs), which are the Chinese version of PLCs [36–38]. It is worth noting that while the notion of TRGs is significantly more popular in China than that of PLCs, some scholars have used both notions as synonyms [39–42]. These authors consider that a TRG reflects the goals, basic principles, and characteristics of a teacher PLC, which is a group of fellow colleagues coming together to share and improve each other’s teaching practices in a continuous, reflective, and collaborative way [19,43–45].

In the early 1950s, the Ministry of Education started to regulate teachers’ professional learning by implementing the “Secondary School Provisional Regulation” [36], subsequently the “Primary School Provisional Regulation” [37], and then the “Work Regulation on Teaching Research Groups in Secondary Schools” [38]. These policy frameworks and regulations described TRGs as organizations in which teachers collectively “study education policies and instruction; study syllabuses, textbooks, and teaching methods; combine teaching practice with the study of educational theory and subject knowledge; summarize and exchange teaching experiences” ([38], p. 1). In the early 1990s, an administrative and accountability system was established to regulate PLCs in primary and secondary schools [46]. Teachers were mandated to conduct scheduled activities focusing on solving practical pedagogical problems to promote their professional growth through peer observation, collaborative lesson planning, and other teaching and research activities. More recent policies have provided further refinements to this framework [47,48].

At the preschool level, the first official nationwide PLC framework was issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in March 2006, urging the establishment of PLCs to promote the development of educators, preschools, and ultimately young children [49]. This policy is known as the “Letter on the Project of Building a Kindergarten-based Teaching and Research System” (henceforth, the Letter). It was released to regulate the progressive implementation of PLCs in preschools across the nation within a period of five years. In line with the excellent practices of teachers in primary and secondary schools, the Letter required educational authorities at all levels (provinces, cities, districts) to take the lead in the establishment of PLCs and design frameworks and regulations aligned with the core values of the national policy, and at the same time respond to the needs and characteristics of each specific preschool setting. The Letter aimed to mandate the creation of a PLC culture in preschools and the implementation of effective teacher learning activities, intended to transform teachers’ practices and promote systemic innovations. The policy highlighted that each preschool should follow their own approach to building and sustaining PLCs, solve the practical problems encountered by teachers, and tackle their specific learning needs. Interestingly, the Letter stressed the importance of involving external experts in PLCs (e.g., professional researchers), arguing that experts and teachers should work together and learn from one another for their mutual benefit [49].

Since the release of the Letter, the educational authorities of provinces, cities, and districts have put great emphasis on establishing a culture of collaborative teacher learning
in all types of preschools (public, private, collective, and sectoral [11,50]). For example, the Shanghai Putuo District was appointed as one of the experimental areas to pilot the “National Kindergarten-based Teaching and Research System Project” [51]. This district-level framework stated that PLCs should be established in all preschools within the district and outlined the respective responsibilities of the various preschool stakeholders. Similarly, the Hainan Provincial Department of Education announced the “Program for Building the Kindergarten-based Teaching and Research System”, requiring the Education Bureaus of the city and the county (district) to promote the construction of PLCs in preschools and the formation of a regional PLC administrative and accountability system [52].

In 2016, another national policy named “Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice” made preschool teachers’ participation in PLC activities compulsory across the country [53]. Preschools became responsible for establishing PLCs, and teachers became responsible for participating in the PLC activities offered by their preschools. This policy reinforced the key role of PLCs as a method of fostering both the professional development of preschool teachers and the improvement of the early childhood education sector in China. Interestingly, the policy did not prescribe specific PLC activities but rather provided a framework to guide the construction and implementation of PLCs. We will discuss the most common PLC activities undertaken by Chinese preschools in the following section.

4. Research on PLCs in Chinese Preschools: Challenging Western PLC Principles

In recent years, a growing number of scholarly publications (written predominantly in Chinese, followed by English) have focused on the topic of preschool teacher PLCs in China. For this conceptual overview paper, publications in Chinese were searched for in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, which is the main and most inclusive academic database in China. Publications in English were searched for in various databases, including Google Scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Scopus, and Web of Science. We used the keywords “Professional Learning Communities” OR “Teachers Research Groups”, AND “preschool* OR kindergarten*” AND “China or Chinese”. All documents shortlisted were read in detail. Summaries highlighting the main findings were produced. Decisions about inclusion of each article in this paper were based on three criteria: (1) the quality of the publication outlet (e.g., as measured by impact factor); (2) the rigor of the output (e.g., methodological quality); and (3) the relevancy of the study in terms of challenging a variety of standard PLC principles.

This section describes a series of conceptual, qualitative, and quantitative studies that support the central argument of this conceptual overview paper—namely, that despite profound differences to Western frameworks, PLCs in Chinese preschools are well implemented, highly regarded by the relevant stakeholders, and effective in benefitting teachers. Note that the purpose of a conceptual overview paper is different to that of a systematic literature review [16]. To support our alternative position on the topic, brief narrative summaries of each of the selected studies are used to challenge specific core principles of Western PLC frameworks, as briefly summarized in the Introduction [1–7].

4.1. Conceptual Case Studies

Although the term PLC is considered imported and foreign, Chinese scholars have written extensively about the Chinese approach (e.g., ‘Moke’, as mentioned in Yang and Li’s research [54] and related characteristics of PLCs in Chinese preschools. Chinese scholars have also proposed some good practices that are aligned with the demands of nationwide policies and regulations in China. Authors such as Chen [55] and Ren [56] conceptualized preschool PLCs as collaborative learning and research organizations, with preschool teachers as the main subjects and pedagogical problems as the objects. Through peer-to-peer communication, cooperation, reflection, and practice, it is understood that PLCs aim at promoting the development of preschools as learning organizations, the professional growth of teachers, and ultimately the healthy growth of children [56]. In fact, preschool-based, teacher-centered, and child-oriented are the three core principles
highlighted in scholarly definitions of preschool PLCs in China. Such principles provide preschools with directions on how to design and implement appropriate PLC activities, and more broadly, how to run PLCs in a sustainable manner [55].

Scholars have argued that PLCs in Chinese preschools require both individual and collective efforts in achieving success. Besides teachers’ self-reflection, it is highly encouraged to promote teachers’ mutual interaction and external experts’ guidance, with the goal of cultivating shared values. In their works, Ren [56] and Zhu [57] asserted that self-reflection and interaction among teachers are the basis and prerequisites of pedagogical research, and that teacher collaboration and mutual assistance are the hallmark and soul of preschool PLCs. These authors also argued that the participation of educational researchers and other professionals is key to the sustainable development of PLCs in Chinese preschools. This differs from Western PLC frameworks, which pose that teachers’ work in PLCs should be guided by their own interests and initiatives [4,5]. In Chinese preschools, it is understood that PLC cultures are nurtured when teachers can identify and internalize the shared school values as their own beliefs [55,58]. For example, in Wuhan’s “Preschool PLC Construction Project”, Peng [59] noted that the formation of shared values and the cultivation of a spiritual culture were critical to the successful implementation of preschool PLCs.

4.2. Qualitative Studies

Several qualitative case studies have been conducted to document and analyze successful PLC practices in Chinese preschools. In contrast to Western frameworks, these studies have conceptualized PLCs as top-down organizational structures with clearly established hierarchies, in which internal leaders and external experts play key roles.

The case study by Qin et al. [60], for example, focused on the importance of internal leadership. The authors analyzed how the leaders of a preschool located in Shenzhen (Guangdong) had established a structured mechanism that facilitated teachers’ professional development, research, and the enhancement of pedagogical practices. Although teachers were consulted about their interests and preferences, PLC activities were mainly determined by the school leaders, in a top-down manner. In other words, internal leadership was found to precede the initiative of teachers, in contrast to Western frameworks. The management system and regulations established by the leaders helped teachers to clarify what to do in PLCs, which guaranteed the smooth implementation of collaborative learning activities. There was full agreement among teachers in this preschool that PLCs supported their professional growth. Note that this study was framed as an exemplary case for other Chinese preschools to follow [60].

Case studies have also demonstrated that successful PLCs in Chinese preschools make teachers’ participation compulsory and involve external experts. For example, Yang [61] conducted a qualitative case study based on two preschools in Fu Jian province. The goal was to examine the core features of effective PLC activities from teachers’ own perspectives. Teachers identified a series of factors that contributed to their learning, including the scheduled mandatory meetings, the existence of clearly established rules, the resources of a research-oriented infrastructure, and the guidance of professionals hired by the preschool for external knowledge transfer.

‘Moke’—a Chinese approach to PLCs—has been documented in the case study of Yang and Li [54]. The term ‘Moke’ (磨课) refers to ‘lesson polishing’ in the context of Chinese education. It involves a process in which teachers have the opportunity to enhance their training and skills through participation in research projects. In the case presented by Yang and Li [54], teachers’ lessons were observed, and feedback was provided by peers and experts. Based on this feedback, the teacher modified the lesson and taught it again, receiving further feedback. This iterative process continued until the teacher was considered to have taught a satisfactory lesson. Chinese preschool teachers typically undergo three iterations of lesson polishing. As a result of teachers’ participation in research and the accompanying lesson polishing, some teachers may excel in providing science and technology education, while others specialize in music education or physical education.
These specialists then become the leading teachers in their respective areas, contributing to the sustainable development of teaching and learning in Chinese preschools. The emphasis on having experts who guide the rest of the teachers is in stark contrast with Western approaches to PLC, as described in the Introduction.

Using action research, Liu [62] investigated the PLC practices of a preschool in Xian (Shanxi province), where the leaders decided to adopt a team-based PLC model. While the teachers were positioned at the core of PLC practices, they received the support of two highly structured teams: a research support team and an instructional organization team. Findings showed that teachers perceived the two mutually supportive teams as effective aids to their professional growth at different levels. For instance, the team-based PLC model resulted in an increased number of teacher promotions, public teaching demonstrations, and award-winning papers. The author concluded that the team-based PLC model boosted preschool teachers’ satisfaction with collaborative learning and research in that particular preschool [62].

This body of qualitative research has shown that regulated structures, internal leadership, and external knowledge transfer have contributed to the effective implementation of PLCs in Chinese preschools, as required by recent national policies. Note that these features resonate with Confucian values that favor a strong hierarchical structure, guidance from external experts, and a greater emphasis on ecological support rather than personal agency and autonomy. It is worth noting, however, that scholars have exclusively relied on teacher-related indicators (e.g., perceptions, satisfaction) and other related outputs (e.g., promotions, awards). None of the case studies identified used child outcomes data to assess the effectiveness of PLCs. In the following subsection, we review the existing body of quantitative studies.

4.3. Large-Scale Quantitative Studies

Quantitative research has shown that Chinese preschool stakeholders are highly satisfied with the implementation of PLCs in their country, and despite clear differences to Western approaches, they consider PLCs to be highly effective in positively supporting teachers’ professional growth, the development of the preschool sector, and children’s development and learning.

Preschool stakeholders in China have high levels of recognition and trust in structured PLC activities, which in their view contribute to improving instruction and solving practical problems. For example, Feng and Wang [63] investigated the practice of preschool PLCs in Xinjiang Province. Their study was conducted with 180 preschool directors, teaching and research leaders, childcare directors, and teachers. The evidence showed that PLC activities had become a well-established component in teachers’ daily learning routines. Teachers demonstrated high levels of cooperation and engagement, with 90% of them often reflecting on their teaching with other colleagues, and 80% seeking help to solve their pedagogical problems. Most teachers (96%) reported to be highly motivated to participate in collective learning activities [63].

Research has also revealed that preschool stakeholders’ perceptions of PLCs is influenced by the level of top-down administrative and material support. Huang [64] used questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and observation to investigate perceptions of material support, rules and regulations, behaviors and relationships among team members, shared values, and vision. While stakeholders’ overall perception of PLCs was positive, teachers and principals from municipal-level preschools (i.e., the highest in terms of reputation and quality) had even better views, given that these preschools receive more teaching resources and financial support for PLCs than preschools at lower levels. This suggests that receiving top-down administrative and material support is seen as essential to running PLCs in Chinese preschools, as the support provides more training opportunities and enhances the stakeholders’ awareness of the opportunities available. The notion of “harmony in diversity” was identified in this study as a unique feature of preschool PLCs in China. Reflecting Confucian values, this notion highlights the importance of interpersonal rela-
tionships as the core spirit of PLCs. Stakeholders in the study expressed that harmony, as the foundation of teamwork, is essential for PLCs to run successfully in the Chinese hierarchical society, as harmony allows teachers to respect differences with other colleagues and cooperate with one another [64].

Quantitative studies have also been conducted to examine stakeholders’ perspectives on the effectiveness of PLCs in Chinese preschools. For example, Wan [65] used a survey to investigate the perspectives of vice principals from 194 preschools in Jiangsu Province on PLC efficacy. The relationship between inputs and outputs of preschool PLCs was measured with a three-stage data envelopment analysis model. The result indicated that PLC management and resource utilization were perceived to be good overall. Moreover, PLC activities directed by external experts (teaching researchers) were perceived to be more effective than teacher-led PLCs. As argued by the author, this is because experts were perceived to possess a richer practical experience and theoretical basis to be able to identify pedagogical problems. However, these quantitative surveys tend to rely on self-reported data, which warrant further verification using more reliable assessments to examine the effectiveness of PLCs in Chinese preschools.

5. Discussion

This conceptual overview paper demonstrates that Western characterizations of teacher PLCs as bottom-up, loosely organized structures driven by teachers’ own interests [4,6–8] differ substantially from the top-down, heavily regulated approach to PLCs in Chinese preschools. For example, Western frameworks propose that a shared vision should derive from teachers’ own values, motivations, and beliefs [9], whereas these are determined by school leaders in Chinese preschools and subsequently internalized by teachers [11,32,58]. Similarly, Western frameworks propose that teachers’ sense of belonging to a community leads to commitment to collaboration. In contrast, collaborative work in Chinese preschools arises from obligation [45,66] due to the mandatory nature of PLCs across the country [53]. Furthermore, PLCs in the West are understood to be self-directed and voluntary, guided by a sense of collective responsibility [4,8], whereas Chinese preschools embed PLC meetings and other professional development sessions in the regular weekly schedule of teachers [63,67,68].

Despite these differences to Western frameworks, the literature reviewed in this article shows that, after more than 17 years of institutional learning, PLCs are well practiced in Chinese preschools across the country [61,65]. More specifically, research shows that PLCs are implemented in alignment with existing policy frameworks and regulations [65], highly appreciated by teachers and other relevant stakeholders [64], and recognized as a beneficial pathway for the development of preschools as organizations [65]. All preschools offer regularly organized, well-designed, and diverse PLC activities that have become part of teachers’ daily routines [63]. Teachers are highly motivated to engage in PLC activities and trust collaborative efforts within the community [63,64]. There is also evidence that, through cooperative learning activities, teachers have enhanced their instructional strategies and gained solutions to practical teaching problems, which has fostered their professional growth [60,62,63].

We argue that this top-down leadership and management approach to PLC works well in China because it is aligned with the socio-cultural characteristics of Chinese society. At the societal level, the core Confucian values of collectivism, social harmony, and self-improvement strongly favor cooperation over individualism, collegial sharing, and respect for wisdom and figures of authority [21,26]. These values drive preschool teachers to naturally accept and follow the vision and obligations established by the leadership, allowing them to easily contribute to the prescribed common goals in their preschools [69]. At the policy level, the existence of policies and regulations that clearly specify obligations and mandatory practices serve as guidelines for all stakeholders in the hierarchy to understand their responsibilities and play their respective roles [70]. Finally, at the school level, the heavily regulated PLC infrastructures combine internal top-down leadership with external
professional support. Teachers themselves consider this guidance essential to engage in and sustain their professional development activities [19,60].

There are still areas of research that need to be further developed to provide a more complete analysis of the status of PLCs in Chinese preschools. Most prior studies have been based on self-reported data (e.g., surveys, interviews, self-assessments), which may lead to socially desirable responses and therefore biased findings [71]. In contrast, studies devoted to assessing the impact of PLCs on teachers’ learning outcomes are lacking [65,72]. Research focusing on changes in instructional practices (e.g., pedagogical strategies, interactional styles, classroom management skills) would be particularly relevant [73]. Additionally, because the ultimate aim of engaging teachers in professional development is to benefit students [74,75], it would also be relevant to analyze the extent to which teachers’ work within PLCs has a positive impact on children’s development and learning.

6. Conclusions

The policy frameworks and research summarized in this conceptual overview paper shows that preschools in China enact culturally situated versions of PLCs, which reflect the traditional Confucian values of collectivism, harmony, and self-perfection [76]. PLCs in Chinese preschools are characterized by some of the standard PLC principles described in Western frameworks, specifically a shared vision, collaboration, and collective responsibility [19,67]. However, such principles co-exist with features that reflect Confucian values, including the mediation of official policy mandates [49], the existence of strong hierarchical structures [19,69], the close guidance of internal leaders and external experts [60,61], and the emphasis on ecological support rather than personal agency and autonomy [60,64].

The hybrid nature of PLCs in Chinese preschools merits international attention. Indeed, this case allows scholars to challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that PLCs should be initiated and led by teachers themselves, following a bottom-up approach [8,9]. The cases demonstrate that the characteristics of PLCs may change and have different meanings across different contexts [77], thereby providing new insights on “how quality leadership and management in education is approached within the local contours of social-cultural-historical understandings” ([78], p. 1). We therefore conclude that Western PLC frameworks need to be carefully re-considered in light of socio-cultural factors, which strongly mediate the ways in which the core tenets of teacher PLCs are put into practice [79].

Implications

This section discusses the implications of the Chinese approach to preschool teacher PLCs for the future direction of PLC policies and practices in China, other Asian countries, and internationally.

While contemporary preschool PLC policies in China seem to be largely successful, there are areas in which PLCs can be further enhanced. First, more detailed policy guidelines should be issued in the future, providing practitioners with examples of concrete PLC activities that have proven effective in prior research, for example action research [68], teacher research workshops [80], as well as observation-based studies, diagnostic studies, and case studies [81]. The establishment of specific sets of requirements and expectations would be helpful for practitioners to know what to do with PLCs and how [82]. Second, as shown by Huang [64], there are important urban–rural disparities in the development of PLCs in China, with urban preschools having more sophisticated regulations and receiving significantly more resources. Preschools in rural settings should be better supported to achieve a comparable stage of development in their PLC practices [82]. A powerful strategy to narrow the gaps between urban/rural as well as public/private preschools in China is the design and implementation of policies on network learning communities (NLCs), such as the recent “Opinions on the Implementation for Promoting Reginal Governance of Early Childhood Education” [83]. The establishment of regional preschool alliances, in which PLCs from a wide network of preschools collaborate face-to-face and/or online and learn from one another, would be an innovative approach to foster learning across PLCs and
reduce disparities in the quality of learning opportunities offered to teachers [84–86]. More NLC policies should be issued to strengthen the level of institutional collaboration and the quality of preschool education nationwide.

In other Asian countries whose societies share similar socio-cultural Confucian values, we recommend that educational policy makers issue well-structured policies that make participation in PLCs compulsory and provide adequate personal and material resources to support the establishment and development of PLCs in preschools. Nurturing internal leaders who coordinate and manage the PLC activities and engaging competent experts to provide external support is vital for the sustainability of these learning communities, as evidenced in the case of China [69].

Finally, this conceptual overview paper also has implications beyond Asia. Internationally, the main implication for educational policy makers and schools is to formulate PLC policies that are culturally situated and responsive to the characteristics of each society. There is increasing agreement that policy borrowing poses multiple risks [87,88]. While it is important to be aware of international trends in education, countries must critically examine their own characteristics and societal values and adapt policies accordingly. The term globalization (global + local) has been recently coined in the field of preschool education to describe the process of hybridization between global trends and local perspectives [89,90]. We argue that while nations should be aware of the PLC principles commonly accepted in the international literature, it is also vital to issue policies that respect the uniqueness of their specific societies. Preschool PLCs in China constitute a case of successful glocalization in policy design and implementation, with high policy/practice alignment leading to highly engaged, satisfied, and motivated preschool stakeholders, eager to further improve themselves for the benefit of young children [12,91]. We hope this conceptual overview paper will inspire educational policy makers, school leaders, and researchers to glocalize their PLC policies and practices in their respective preschool education systems.

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