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School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) in the Context of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM): A Policy Assessment

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Abstract

This study attempted to propose a model of SLAC (School Learning Action Cell) grounded from the assessment of the different phases of the SLAC program and the challenges encountered in terms of its design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This study employed a qualitative approach to describe the experiences of the 24 elementary school heads during SLAC sessions. These participants were from the different participating schools within the BARMM region. Employing interview sessions, document analysis, and observations, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that planning on the objectives of the sessions, topics on research and innovation, diversity of participants, delayed MOOE budget, faculty attendance, and lack of tools for monitoring and evaluation are the challenges encountered by the study participants during SLAC sessions. From these challenges, the participants provided the following suggestions: 1) effective monitoring and evaluation of SLAC, (2) proper and intensive scheduling of SLAC, (3) thorough planning, (4) refinement of topics, and (5) inviting outside resource speakers. Finally, grounding from the themes generated, this study proposed a conceptual model of SLAC with three dimensions, namely: the design, the action implementation, and the monitoring and evaluation, termed COPPEC (Community of Practice-based Planning, Execution, and Control). This study concludes the promising benefits of SLAC, especially its cost-effective means for professional development of teachers, thus, it must be properly implemented provided that challenges are addressed.

Keywords: Learning Action Cell, School Learning Action Cell, Thematic Analysis, Professional Development, MBHTE-BARMM

1. Introduction

The cliché "no man is an island" is a wisdom that seems to be true in most circumstances, especially in the context of education. Teachers and other practitioners have been emphasizing and promoting collaborative learning or collaborative work, because as the saying goes, "two heads are better than one." While teachers implement various

group tasks to their students in order to foster collaboration, the same rationale applies to teachers who are ceaseless in enhancing and elevating their mastery of the subject matter and pedagogy for effective teaching. The end-goal of all these is for the students to receive quality education which is largely maneuvered by the classroom teacher.

One of the many ways to enhance the teaching-learning knowledge and skills of the teachers is through engaging in professional development to improve professional performance. According to Lewis (2002 as cited in Mendoza et al., 2017), professional development is the key to educational improvement. One of these is through coaching. Grant (2017) recognized the importance of coaching and considered it as universal practice for improving the professional performance of individuals which could, in effect, be beneficial to the organization. In Japan, one of their efforts to promote professional development among their teachers is their Lesson Study framework. It is a collaborative approach aimed at training and teaching the teachers to plan, present, observe, and evaluate and reflect on classroom lessons (Mendoza, et al., 2017). This Lesson Study was adapted in the Philippines by the Department of Education (DepEd) through the Learning Action Cell (LAC).

In line with the implementation of Republic Act 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, the Department of Education (DepEd) issued the policy on the Learning Action Cell (LAC) as a K-12 Basic Education Program School-Based Continuing Professional Development Strategy for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning (DepEd Order # 35 s. 2016). Learning Action Cell (LAC) is a policy that aims to involve and engage teachers in "positive, caring, and safe collaborative learning sessions to solve shared challenges encountered in the school" (Correos & Paler, 2020). This program is facilitated by respective school heads or if there is a designated LAC leader who will then group the teachers to find solution to problems or solve shared challenges such as learners' diversity, content and pedagogy, assessment and reporting, and ICT integration (De Vera & De Borja, 2020; Cabral & Millando, 2019). The LAC is a process of teaching-learning that is considered to be cost-effective continuing professional development (Oakley, King, & Scarparolo, G, 2018) because it is done through teacher collaboration and coaching. The LAC sessions are conducted not only to improve the teachers' knowledge and skills, but also to improve the students' performance inside the classroom as its end-goal or outputs (Binauhan, 2019).

With the belief that no individual or teacher has the expertise of all aspects of epistemological knowledge of teaching and learning, Bajar et al., (2021) noted that combinations of insights and expertise of various teachers can help enrich their knowledge, skill, and competence.

Almost a decade into the implementation of the Learning Action Cells (LACs), there are studies which claim the LAC's effectiveness and impact on the learners. For instance, Pascua (2019) reported that the level of effectiveness of LAC sessions was perceived to be "Highly Effective." Verbo (2021) also disclosed during the 25th Asian Technology Conference in Mathematics, that there was an increase in the overall performance of the students before and after the LAC.

A number of further studies have been conducted on LAC, which generally depicted a positive impact on teachers' performance, beliefs, and practices. For instance, Culajara (2022) reported that LAC sessions as a tool helped address the instructional and knowledge gaps of the teachers, which then makes the teaching and learning effective. This is confirmed in other studies utilizing action research on LAC as an intervention to test its effect. For instance, the LAC sessions about climate change among elementary teachers showed a positive significant effect on the teachers' level of awareness and knowledge (Adlit, 2022). The teaching ability or teaching practices of the teachers after the conduct of LAC have improved (Verbo, 2019; Cabral & Millando, 2019; Medina et al., 2023) as well as the overall students' performance which showed commendable improvement (Verbo, 2019.).

While there are several studies indicating benefits of LAC, especially the more recent paper of Medina et al. (2023) on the positive impact of LAC session on teachers' beliefs and practices and increases their participation, there are still reported issues and challenges encountered in its implementation and conduct. The problems identified were the prioritization of topics or topics that are based on one's field of specialization rather than general topics (Silva, 2021; De Vera and De Borja, 2020) preparation of LAC materials (Silva, 2021); lack of preparation and

professional development, excessive academic load for the students, and integration of lessons in real-life context (Verbo, 2019); some teachers also failed to identify the relevance of LAC session to their teaching profession (Cabral and Millando, 2019). Furthermore, scheduling, disruption of classes, teachers' availability, LAC Activities, LAC Framework, and Funding (Vega, 2020) were also the challenges deemed by other teachers.

The study of Correos and Paler (2020) depicted that teachers' and even school heads' understanding of the implementation of SLAC is limited. The teachers also reported that they did not see how the school heads are focused on the implementation and monitoring of SLAC in schools. This implies that teachers and school heads appear to have lacking sufficient knowledge, awareness, and full understanding of SLAC and how beneficial it is. It suggests, therefore, that there is a need to get a clear picture of the structure and process of the conduct or implementation of LAC. On the other hand, Vega's (2020) multiple case study on LAC experiences of the teachers revealed that the participants recommended the need for creating a LAC model and development of LAC evaluation to monitor the status of its implementation. It should be noted that although the DepEd policy on LAC explained the theoretical framework as the basis of LAC implementation, the framework did not provide a more specific process for the conduct of LAC sessions.

In addition, few conducted a qualitative, most importantly, none proposed a model or framework that could guide the teachers and school heads in its implementation. With these aforementioned gaps in the literature on SLAC, the purpose of this qualitative study is to assess the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) in the schools of BARMM. The participants of this study were the school principals from the different participating schools within the BARMM region. The school principals were chosen as the participants as they can provide informed data that are needed to address the research questions of this paper. School principals are the identified leaders of SLAC sessions as stipulated in the DepEd Order no. 35, s. 2016 or the policy on Learning Action Cell (LAC).

The selected school principals provided information based on their experiences with the implementation of SLAC in their respective schools. Hence, this study specifically assessed the different stages of the SLAC, from its design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stage and with the end-goal of generating a SLAC model that can be used by the region for a more effective implementation of the policy.

2. Method

This study employed qualitative research design to explore the experiences of the participants about a phenomenon of focus. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative study is used to describe the meaning of experiences for several individuals, with a focus on depicting what these participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The phenomenon investigated is the teacher coaching and facilitating through school learning action cell and helped explore how the school heads experienced the phenomenon of SLAC and the issues and challenges they had faced.

The participants of this study were the twenty-four (24) school principals, school heads or teacher-in-charge in the selected schools of BARMM. These participants were chosen because as school heads, they are in charge of the implementation in terms of planning, designing, organizing, and conducting SLAC sessions on a school-based level, as well as involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation. The researchers utilized interview, document analysis, and observation as the gathering tools of the study. Interviews are conducted and are chosen due to its ability to go deeply into the understanding and experiences of the participants. The interview questions are developed from the review of literature and are aligned with the research questions as well as the conceptual framework. The interview protocol was the guide for each interview. Guided questions and follow-up probes were also used. Additional clarifying questions were asked within the semi-structured interview format when elaboration from the participant is required (Mertens, 2010). Data was also collected through observations of coaching sessions involving the instructional coach and classroom teachers. The intention of the observations is not for the researchers to gain a complete and thorough insight into the pedagogy of instructional coaching. Rather, the observations are intended for the researchers to use as confirmatory examples of what the instructional coaches have shared in the interviews.

Moreover, document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) materials. Documents contained text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researchers' intervention. In this study, documents on the conduct of SLAC sessions in selected elementary schools in BARMM were obtained for analysis. These documents include narrative reports on SLAC, documentation, and/or accomplishment report. This is to validate the information gathered from the interview session.

The researchers also conducted observations with some participants. The researchers chose this due to going deeply into the understanding and experiences of the participants. During the observation, the researchers collected the data and took notes of the happenings during the SLAC session. The intention of the observation is not for the researchers to gain complete and thorough insights into the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC). Rather, the observations are intended for the researchers to use verifiable examples of what School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) as shared by the respondents.

This study followed the qualitative data analysis strategies suggested by Creswell (2007), which include preparing and organizing data, reducing data into themes through coding, and presenting data in non-textual form. The study involved transcribing and bracketing the interviews, developing the coding method, creating themes, writing a composite description, validating the findings with the participants, and creating a graphical representation of the phenomenon. The study aimed to present a model of SLAC based on the participants' experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Assessment of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC)

3.1.1. Design

Analysis of the data collected revealed various aspects to which the participants would assess the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) according to its design. Based on the interview, the participants revealed that school learning action cell sessions begin with planning or action plan, which involves the design of the SLAC sessions. Extracted from the analysis of data, it revealed that SLAC is designed based on the following: (1) purpose of SLAC sessions, (2) designating lecturers, (3) motivating teachers to participate, (4) discussing topics related to school needs, and (5) providing technical assistance.

Firstly, the purpose of conducting a School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) session is crucial, as it serves as the target and direction for the session. The LAC leader must determine the effectiveness of the session by investing in its purpose, identifying the beneficiaries, and outlining how it can be beneficial. By doing so, SLAC members will have a clear understanding of what needs to be accomplished at the end of the session. This provides them with a sense of purpose. According to the transcribed interviews, 9 out of 24 participants emphasized that the purpose of the SLAC should be given top priority as it is the stepping stone towards the success of the session.

This finding highlights the importance of setting goals or objectives for SLAC sessions. The Ministry of Basic, Higher and Technical Education (MBHTE) of BARMM considers this initial stage when conducting sessions. The purpose of the SLAC determines the content of the session, which varies by division. The participants followed the implementation process in the DO No. 35, s. 2016, which involves assessing the teachers' needs and identifying the issues for the LAC session. The leader would create an action plan with the objectives based on the needs. Setting a goal or purpose is crucial for the success of an activity, as it guides and motivates the members (Laranjo, 2016). According to Self-determination Theory, goals influence behavior (Laranjo, 2016). The objectives of a SLAC session allow the participants to have a direction and a goal, which aligns with the framework of LAC as a community of practice that involves collaborative planning.

Secondly, lecturers or guest speakers are important people in the session. These people could enlighten the teacher-participants to re-evaluate themselves on the topic they are actually into. This also encourages critical reflection

among teachers which increases the understanding and knowledge of the topics being discussed. Additionally, 7 out of 24 participants emphasized that the selection of lectures and/or topic should also be identified.

In the observation of SLAC sessions, the researchers discerned that principals were the common SLAC lecturers. In all the observed schools, the principal served as the SLAC leader, facilitator and at the same time lecturer. These principals or school heads discussed various topics and at the same time provided technical support for the successful conduct of their SLAC session. This finding indicates how school principals in BARMM lay their trust in some of their teachers to lead a SLAC session. In addition to them, being the automatic SLAC leader as principals, they also allow their master teachers to lead in order to share their relevant skills and knowledge that could be beneficial to the other teachers.

Looking at how LAC is composed of various members and how peer mentoring is practiced, previous studies showed that teachers are motivated and have improved on their pedagogical skills. For instance, Binauhan (2019) in her study on the LAC implementation in the division of Cavite, it was disclosed that teachers and implementers performed well in their task during LAC session. The same findings were reported by Mendoza et al. (2017) and Culajara (2022) depicting that LAC sessions improved the teachers' knowledge that helped in effective teaching and learning and addressed the knowledge gaps and digital divides. However, it should be noted that this present study did not dwell on the effectiveness or impact of LAC sessions in the BARMM. Rather, this study is focused on assessing the LAC as a policy and how the policy is situated and applied in the region of BARMM.

Thirdly, participation of teachers in a SLAC is a testament that they are willing to adapt to changes and innovation evolving to a continuing professional development. Therefore, 10 out of 24 participants answered that teachers should be motivated to actively participate in the SLAC since the primary goal of the session benefits not only the students but also the teachers. They will have mastery of the topics when it is repeatedly done and thus, learning can be positively anticipated.

This study suggests a positive perception of SLAC sessions among BARMM teachers, evident in their motivation as reported by principals. This enthusiasm aligns with the concept of a growth mindset, where teachers embrace development opportunities to improve their practice and student learning. They view their skills and knowledge as improvable through dedication, learning, and collaboration. This aligns with self-determination theory (Aggouni, 2015), where increased intrinsic motivation stems from social settings fulfilling basic needs. In SLAC sessions, being chosen as a mentor or lecturer offers competence by showcasing expertise, autonomy in planning delivery, and relatedness as a leader and expert. These fulfilled needs contribute to high motivation for participating in SLAC.

Fourthly, Learning Action Cell (LAC) is a continuing school-based session that can be used to introduce new concepts and ideas as keys to look for the grassroots of the existing problems in the school and plan for a better intervention to overcome these pressing problems. Moreover, all or 100% of the participants mentioned discussing topics should be based on school needs. Therefore, planning and identifying relevant topics should be looked into. This study revealed diversity in SLAC topics across MBHTE-BARMM schools, reflecting their holistic approach to professional development. Despite cultural diversity, a common goal of improving personal and professional skills remained prevalent. Notably, teacher and staff autonomy in choosing topics positively impacted them, aligning with studies by Bajar et al. (2021) and Silva (2021). These studies highlight reduced workload, improved pedagogy, and increased teacher efficacy as benefits of SLAC autonomy. While topics varied, Silva (2021) identified areas for additional training, including learner diversity, content and pedagogy, assessment, 21st-century skills integration, and curriculum contextualization.

Finally, to strengthen the school in managing the occurrence of lapses, the technical assistance coming from the LAC leader or other concerned individuals brings so much help leading to the achievement of the school's performance outcomes with the end in view of providing relevant, timely and appropriate results in the future. On the other hand, 18 out of 24 participants answered that in conducting SLAC sessions, leaders or facilitators need to identify the type of technical assistance needed to make the program successful.

The findings on the technical assistance depict that there is an existing collaborative effort among all stakeholders of SLAC in MBHTE-BARMM. Crucially, the Ministry of Education in BARMM also needs to improve the ICT programs or technological assistance given by the Department of Education (DepEd) to its schools. The D.O #35 s. 2016 enumerated the process of implementation such as assessment of needs, prioritization of topics or agenda, formation of LAC, identification of appropriate intervention, and scheduling of meetings. It can be argued and recommended that as far as the BARMM stakeholders are concerned, the "assessment of needs" should not only be limited to the professional or career stage needs of the teachers but also other needs, especially technical needs, of the SLAC stakeholders during sessions. This is the common case among schools in the rural and remote areas who lack the necessary equipment or devices to appropriately conduct and organize SLAC as revealed by the participants.

3.1.2. Implementation

The second aspect of how SLAC is being assessed is the implementation part. Based on the qualitative analysis of the data, the categories found that are used to assess the implementation of SLAC are the following: (1) teachers' participation and collaboration and (2) utilization of professional learning tools.

In the implementation of the SLAC session, the data revealed a positive outcome of the process which is the active participation of the teachers and their collaboration. The capacity of the teachers to participate is based on two reasons: willingness to participate and mandatory participation. Besides, 22 out of 24 participants asserted that the willingness to participate in a planned School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) bring positive outcome because the active participation of the teachers is tantamount to embracing innovation.

The findings suggest that the implementation of SLAC in BARMM is positively embraced by the teachers and could lead to cordial relationships among its members or stakeholders. Good or cordial relationships among teachers tend to foster a productive and efficient working environment. This finding aligns with previous research by Mendoza (2017) and Bajar et al. (2021), highlighting how SLAC sessions promote collaboration, open-mindedness, and commitment among participants.

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of SLAC sessions creates fertile ground for applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. As teachers share experiences and challenges, they collectively contribute to each other's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Experienced teachers and invited resource persons can then guide and support less experienced colleagues, fostering a collaborative learning environment.

In essence, the sociocultural theory underscores that learning is not an isolated, individual endeavor but a socially mediated process. The collaborative and participatory nature of SLAC sessions within the BARMM aligns with this perspective, creating a platform for teachers to collectively advance their professional development within a supportive community of practice, regardless of their diverse ethnic background. As teachers actively collaborate, share insights, and collectively problem-solve, they contribute to the dynamic learning process that Vygotsky's theory emphasizes.

On the one hand, it is also crucial to stay up-to-date with the latest learning tools that can be used in the implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) to ensure the provision of the best education possible to our learners. Another is almost or 23 out of 24 participants affirmed that utilization of professional learning tools is part SLAC success.

This finding indicates that while the participants reported some technical assistance they needed, nevertheless, it reflected how these school principals in BARMM are resourceful enough to find ways to conduct SLAC despite scarcity of some aspects. It reflects resiliency, commitment and dedication among BARMM education stakeholders. These participants are aware that professional learning tools are equally important in any professional development activities, because not only does it help the lecturer and the participants to have better understanding of the topics but also to monitor and evaluate the SLAC session. Therefore, reiterating what has been mentioned in the previous paragraphs, assessment of needs should not only be conformed with the career stage-related needs

or professional development needs, since these are all related to documents and participations in educational advancement; but rather needs should also be identified with something concrete that is useful and helpful in the attainment of the duties and responsibilities of teachers.

3.1.3. Monitoring and Evaluation

Based on the analysis of the data, the categories emerged in the assessment of the monitoring and evaluation of SLAC sessions are the following: (1) Classroom Observation and Post Conference; (2) Improvement of Teaching-Learning Process; (3) Nurtures Professional Development; and (4) Collaboration and Assistantship among Teachers.

First, in providing feedback in the design and implementation of the conduct of the LAC session, observation and/or post conference is vital in ensuring its level of effectiveness and providing an opportunity to assess learning, inform instruction and adjust education plans relevant to the topics being discussed.

This study suggests consistent adherence to monitoring and evaluation guidelines by BARMM principals, demonstrating their commitment to effective SLAC implementation. Unlike findings from Correos and Paler (2020) where teachers perceived a lack of leadership focus on SLAC, the present study highlights principals' informed approach and keen interest in monitoring and evaluation. Notably, some principals even enforce mandatory participation, further emphasizing their dedication to fostering a collaborative learning environment.

Second, the challenge to improve teaching and learning school-wide is a task that is worth noting. The ever-changing environment coupled with constantly moving changes leaves us wondering its continuous alterations; however, the LAC session can be of help in providing relevant interventions and alternatives to better learning. Besides, all participants affirmed that the realization of School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) targets the improvement of teaching-learning process. They mentioned that it could be evaluated with the use of tools that are contextualized.

This finding suggests that SLAC effectively promotes personal and professional development for teachers in BARMM, as well as their learners. School principals reported improvements in teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes, although further quantitative data is needed for confirmation. However, the flexible and contextually relevant topics addressed in SLAC sessions resonate with previous studies by Bajar et al. (2021) and Mendoza et al. (2017), highlighting its potential to enhance instructional mastery, teacher efficacy, and teaching-learning practices. This flexible approach allows for authentic solutions to challenges faced by teachers and schools in BARMM.

Third, in today's rapidly evolving professional landscape, success hinges upon our ability to adapt, innovate, and continuously learn. Everyone needs to embrace the mindset of life-long learning to thrive in an ever-changing world. Additionally, almost 23 out of 24 participants emphasized that they nurtured, renewed their commitment and new directions towards professional development through SLAC sessions.

This study suggests that SLAC sessions in BARMM foster a holistic approach to professional development, extending benefits beyond technical skills to encompass personality traits and social-emotional learning. This translates to improved emotion management, communication, and relationship building, especially relevant in the BARMM context. Effective implementation of SLAC can yield significant benefits for its target audience.

The findings align with previous research by Mendoza et al. (2017) highlighting renewed commitment and direction towards professional development fostered by SLAC activities. Similarly, Verbo (2019) reported improvements in content knowledge and teaching ability after LAC implementation, validating the program's positive impact.

Finally, teachers' collaboration provides fellow educators opportunities to meet, share insights, create cohesive plans, and work together effectively. This needs to be given extra mindfulness since it brings success in identifying

educational practices that consistently help in the long run. Twenty-three (23) out of 24 participants asserted that collaboration is apparent especially in the context of not attending the scheduled sessions, therefore, they have to collaborate with the other teachers to be mentored regarding the topics that were discussed.

Confirming what has been mentioned in the previous section, this finding implies that the SLAC session in the context of BARMM appears to be beneficial for the BARMM teachers as it fosters working with colleagues and provides assistance for those who need it. With the Bangsamoro Transition Authority that was established five years ago, it is safe to say that they are still in the adjustment period of transitioning from the debunked Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to BARMM. Not to mention that the region has been hiring new teachers for the past few years, thus, collaborative, and free professional development activities are highly needed for these teachers, specifically the newly hired in the various divisions or provinces in the BARMM.

This emphasis on collaboration resonates with previous research by Bajar et al. (2021) and Mendoza et al. (2017), demonstrating SLAC's potential to promote workplace collaboration, reduce teacher workload, and enhance well-being. Considering the positive impact observed in this study, sustained and expanded SLAC programs offer promising avenues for improving teacher development and educational outcomes in BARMM.

3.2. Issues and Challenges Encountered During the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) Sessions

3.2.1. Challenges in the Design

As to the issues and challenges that were identified in designing a SLAC program, the following are the results: (1) objective planning and presentation, (2) diversity of SLAC participants and teaching methods, (3) topics on research and innovation.

An important part of the design of a SLAC program is to list its objectives. In the analysis of the data, it was found that planning the objectives and presentation is one of the challenges encountered by the participants. The common challenges that relate to this aspect are the issue of early planning of a clear objective and discussion of objectives during the SLAC session. Furthermore, on the part of SLAC members, who are the teachers, having clear objectives or purpose of the session is an issue for them, as well as who will explain the objectives of the session. There are also cases in which objectives were not discussed to them according to the participants.

This study highlights the importance of clear objectives in BARMM SLAC sessions. While training in objective presentation might not be necessary, a reminder to carefully plan and present objectives before each session is crucial. The absence of clear objectives can hinder focused collaboration, effective use of development time, and meaningful peer interactions. Clear objectives align teacher efforts, foster collaboration, and ultimately enhance educational quality in BARMM. As Lucas and Corpuz (2020) point out, clear objectives activate participants' prior knowledge, facilitating the learning process. Addressing this aspect aligns with previous research by Cabral and Millando (2019) and Correos and Paler (2020), where teachers emphasized the importance of clearly stated objectives and their impact on learning outcomes.

Moreover, it is worth noting that schools in BARMM are diverse coupled with cultural differences that remain constant. Based on this theme, this shows that teachers are different in pedagogy and that SLAC is imperative to address these differences with the end goal of attaining successful learning outcomes for BARMM learners. Besides, 14 out of 24 participants mentioned that diversity in the school is apparent. This does not mean that teachers with exceptional abilities should be isolated in conducting the sessions, heterogeneous grouping should be adopted to ensure equitable distribution and collaboration among teachers.

Just as how the BARMM teachers have to deal with the diverse students of different needs and interests, learning styles, and of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, the same scenarios are faced by the SLAC leaders. In addition to these differences, the participants also had to address the individual preference of the teachers in terms of their teaching approaches and teaching methods. It can be said that this is a natural scenario since teachers have different fields of specialization, educational attainment, and experiences.

This study highlights the need to address teacher diversity and preferences in BARMM SLAC sessions for effective policy development. Recognizing and accommodating diverse teaching styles and preferences through flexible action plans, shared strategies, and targeted support are crucial for successful collaboration. Integrating these insights into SLAC policy can enrich the collective knowledge base, improve teaching practices, and potentially serve as a model for DepEd at the national level. Informing BARMM Ministry of Education officials at all levels about these issues can empower them to make informed decisions for improving the LAC framework.

Further, it is unfortunate to note that SLAC sessions conducted in BARMM did not tackle research and it may show that research is not given priority since evaluation is not closely monitored. Additionally, 23 out of 24 participants affirmed that topics on research should be addressed. Some teachers omit research from their sessions because they feel unequipped to discuss it, lacking expertise on the topic.

This study suggests a strong focus on teaching and learning processes in BARMM SLAC sessions, addressing urgent needs for teacher competency improvement and quality education delivery, particularly relevant given the region's low literacy rates and enrollment. This highlights the importance of professional development through SLACs in tackling these challenges. Furthermore, these findings call for potential revisions to the national LAC policy and guidelines (DO 035, s.2016). While the current document recommends topics like learner diversity and curriculum contextualization, it lacks explicit mention of research and innovation. While flexibility in topic selection exists, specific guidance on incorporating cutting-edge approaches could benefit BARMM's unique context. This could involve revising the recommended topics list or providing clearer guidance for school heads and SLAC leaders on incorporating research and innovation elements into their sessions.

3.2.2. Challenges in the Implementation

In the implementation of the SLAC program, there are two identified issues and challenges which are the (1) delayed budget release of MOOE and the (2) problem with the faculty attendance.

Regarding challenges in implementing SLAC, participants revealed that the delayed release of the Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) often hampers their ability to conduct sessions effectively. This issue impacts SLAC sessions comprehensively, as some are carried out without necessary technical support. For instance, the allocation of honoraria for external expert speakers becomes unattainable due to budget constraints. Sixteen out of twenty-four participants cited delayed MOOE as a hindrance to session execution. Despite budgetary constraints, some teachers remained committed to conducting SLAC sessions.

This study reveals that while school heads in BARMM demonstrate remarkable commitment to organizing SLAC sessions despite budget limitations, this situation should not be normalized. It presents a compelling argument for BARMM Ministry of Education officials, from regional to division levels, to prioritize timely disbursement of allotted school budgets. The dedication of school heads and teachers deserves prompt encouragement and support through budget allocation. Delays attributed to bureaucratic hurdles should be addressed efficiently. Prolonged delays risk negating the positive impact of collaborative efforts within SLAC sessions, potentially hindering educational progress in the region. This finding contradicts with Reazo (2021), who highlighted budget preparation as a less problematic aspect of LAC implementation. However, the present study underscores the specific challenge of delayed budget release faced by BARMM schools, affecting their ability to effectively utilize allocated funds for SLAC activities.

Furthermore, participants noted the dedication of teachers towards achieving SLAC goals. However, some teachers showed less commitment to participating in SLAC sessions, possibly due to difficulties in adapting to change. Moreover, 19 out of 24 participants highlighted challenges with teacher punctuality in attending SLAC sessions. Occasionally, sessions had to be rescheduled by the LAC leader or facilitators due to incomplete teacher attendance.

This finding identifies lack of commitment and punctuality among BARMM teachers participating in SLAC sessions as a critical concern. This undermines collaboration, hinders idea exchange, and creates disparity in professional development. In a region like BARMM, reliant on collaboration to address unique challenges, these issues can exacerbate existing educational problems. Targeted interventions like professional development programs, incentives, or support systems are crucial to address this challenge. Strengthening policies that encourage and reward active SLAC participation can further create a more effective and inclusive professional development framework. These findings align with previous research by Bajar et al. (2021), Vega (2020), and Reazo (2021) highlighting issues with scheduling, out-of-field teaching, and teacher availability. This underlines the need for context-specific solutions and flexible scheduling to optimize SLAC effectiveness in BARMM.

3.2.3. Challenges in the Monitoring and Evaluation

A notable weakness identified is the absence of evaluation tools during the monitoring and evaluation of LAC sessions, which are crucial for fostering educational advancement. Additionally, 22 out of 24 participants highlighted the lack of an evaluation tool for monitoring teachers and/or schools as problematic. Without such tools, it becomes challenging to assess the effectiveness of conducted sessions, identify areas for improvement, and determine overall success.

This study emphasizes the urgent need for a BARMM-specific instructional supervision tool for monitoring and evaluating SLAC sessions. Such a tool is crucial to effectively assess SLAC's impact in a region with unique challenges, priorities, and cultural contexts. Without a tailored tool, there is a risk of overlooking crucial nuances and misjudging the effectiveness of SLAC initiatives for BARMM learners. This can hinder identifying best practices and areas for improvement. This finding aligns with Vega's (2020) study, identifying the lack of an evaluation tool for LAC sessions as a key challenge. Developing and implementing a BARMM-specific tool will facilitate a more accurate assessment of collaborative professional development efforts and their impact on educational outcomes in the region.

3.3. Participants' Suggestions That Can Be Helpful in Designing, Implementing, and Monitoring and Evaluating SLAC Sessions

3.3.1. Effective monitoring and evaluation of SLAC

In most programs of the Department of Education, such as instructional supervision, are subject to effective monitoring and evaluation, SLAC sessions in BARMM are reportedly not closely monitored. Participants noted that SLAC sessions are often viewed merely as a matter of compliance rather than a policy implemented within schools. Additionally, 6 out of 24 participants expressed agreement on the necessity of effective monitoring and evaluation. They argued that without it, SLAC sessions are likely viewed solely as compliance measures, thereby hindering the DepEd's objectives for SLAC implementation.

This finding suggests that while design and implementation of SLAC seem adequate in BARMM, the monitoring and evaluation phase requires significant improvement. School principals identified this as a critical area, highlighting potential shortcomings in assessing program impact and effectiveness. This finding presents a valuable opportunity for the BARMM Ministry of Education. One of the implications of this finding is to focus on evaluation by developing region-specific tools and assessment measures tailored to BARMM's unique educational context. Another one is ensuring policies and practices at the policy-making level harness the full potential of SLAC, leading to informed decision-making and continuous improvement. This aligns with Correos and Paler (2020), who identified a lack of clear evaluation processes for SLAC. While capacity building for teachers was not suggested in this study, intensifying, sustaining, and improving SLAC overall remains crucial.

3.3.2. Proper and Intensive Scheduling of SLAC

The LAC is a mandatory policy, and it is then implied in the policy that it should be practiced every afternoon on the last day of the week. Further, 19 out of 24 participants mentioned that the punctuality of the teachers in

attending SLAC can be a challenge. The LAC leader and/or facilitators sometimes reschedule the sessions because of the incomplete number of teachers.

This finding highlights the influence of cultural norms on SLAC implementation in BARMM. The strong family orientation and social obligations among Muslims in BARMM can lead to scheduling conflicts, despite positive attitudes towards SLAC. This aligns with previous research by Vega (2020) and Reazo (2021), identifying scheduling inconsistencies and conflicts with school activities as key challenges. To address these concerns, participants suggest flexible scheduling based on participants' common availability. This can enhance attendance, cooperation, and ultimately, the effectiveness of SLAC as a valuable professional development program for BARMM teachers.

3.3.3. Thorough Planning

Ensuring the success of SLAC sessions entails more than just meeting compliance standards. It requires meticulous planning and design aimed at addressing school issues and exploring effective interventions. Successful SLAC sessions should actively engage participants in collaborative discussions to generate alternative solutions. Participants emphasized the importance of thorough planning to enhance SLAC sessions, with 7 out of 24 respondents noting its potential to improve session quality. They emphasized the value of well-planned objectives and technical assistance, advocating for a steady, deliberate approach over rushed implementations.

This finding suggests that ineffective planning or implementation of LAC sessions in BARMM necessitates revising the LAC framework and policy. Convening Ministry of Education officials, superintendents, supervisors, and school heads could facilitate this realignment. The theoretical framework of LAC, outlined in D.O no. 35, s.2016, emphasizes collaborative planning, problem-solving, and action as key elements for teacher development. Previous research like Mendoza et al. (2017) supports this, highlighting how lesson study fosters collaboration and planning skills. However, the current study points to potential shortcomings in planning within BARMM's LAC sessions. While Gumban and Pelones (2021) found overall teacher performance to be satisfactory, including curriculum and planning, the present study identifies opportunities for improvement. Therefore, revisiting the LAC framework and policy through collaborative efforts can enhance planning, leading to more effective professional development experiences for BARMM teachers, aligning with the theoretical foundation of LAC as a community of practice.

3.3.4. Refinement of Topics

Several participants proposed the importance of contextualizing topics suggested by the division or region to ensure relevance to the specific needs and situations of schools. Additionally, 12 out of 24 participants recommended refining topics prior to the SLAC sessions. While the DepEd offers suggested topics for delivery, emphasis should be placed on selecting the most pertinent and impactful topics that directly affect and align with the context of the schools.

This finding emphasizes the importance of refining SLAC session topics to address the specific needs and challenges encountered by teachers in BARMM. It aligns with studies by Silva (2021) and De Vera and De Borja (2020), which identified concerns regarding topic prioritization in LAC settings. However, Reazo (2021) found perceived success in topic prioritization, suggesting contextual variations. This difference highlights the necessity of tailoring SLAC topics to the local context. BARMM's unique needs may differ from those of other regions, requiring region-specific considerations during topic selection and implementation. This finding highlights the limitations of universal solutions in collaborative professional development and stresses the need for nuanced approaches that consider local factors and variations across different contexts.

3.3.5. Inviting Outside Resource Speakers

Most participants recommended inviting outside speakers with expertise in the topics under discussion, rather than solely relying on school principals or master teachers. These speakers should possess specialized knowledge and

could be sourced from the division office or universities. Additionally, 10 out of 24 participants indicated that inviting speakers could enhance the sessions. The current arrangement of SLAC sessions involves rotating teachers responsible for conducting them.

This finding highlights a potential conflict regarding resource speakers in BARMM SLAC sessions. While participants suggest inviting external speakers for novelty and expertise, this might imply a lack of trust in internal colleagues' ability to deliver valuable knowledge. Trust is crucial for effective learning, suggesting the need for alternative solutions. Furthermore, the cost-effectiveness principle of SLAC outlined in D.O. 035, s.2016 necessitates careful consideration of external speaker invitations. This aligns with Correos and Paler's (2020) recommendation for intensive capacity building for school heads and teachers in conducting and monitoring SLAC. Equipping internal stakeholders with necessary skills could address the need for expertise while adhering to budget constraints.

3.4. A Proposed Model of SLAC generated from the Findings of the study

Based on the data gathered, analyzed, and interpreted laboriously, this present paper proposed the following model that is grounded from the findings of the study. Moreover, the previous sections present the results of the assessment and challenges of SLAC in terms of its design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Each aspect reveals various themes emerging from the data which depicts the process and structure of SLAC. Hence, these underlying structures entail three essential dimensions of SLAC program of the Department of Education.
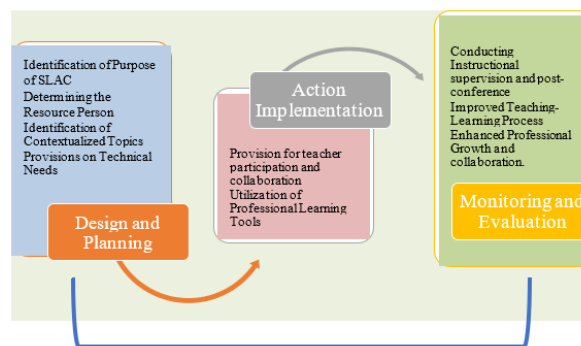

Figure 1: COPPEC Model of School Learning Action Cell

Figure 1 above depicts the proposed conceptual model for School Learning Action Cell (SLAC). This proposed conceptual model named COPPEC, embodies a comprehensive approach to facilitating professional development and enhancing educational outcomes.

COPPEC integrates the principles of Community of Practice (COP) throughout its three phases: design and planning, action implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Under the design and planning phase, COPPEC emphasizes the identification of SLAC's purpose or objectives, selection of resource persons, identification of contextualized topics, and provisions for technical assistance. These elements lay the foundation for collaborative learning and knowledge exchange among educators (Silva, 2021; De Vera & De Borja, 2020).

During the action implementation phase, COPPEC underscores the importance of promoting teachers' participation and collaboration, as well as the utilization of professional learning tools. This phase encourages active engagement and peer support among educators, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

In the monitoring and evaluation phase, COPPEC focuses on instructional supervision, post-conference discussions, and enhancing the teaching-learning process. By prioritizing professional growth and collaboration, this phase ensures that SLAC sessions have a measurable impact on teaching practices and overall educational quality (Reazo, 2021).

Overall, COPPEC recognizes the centrality of the Community of Practice as both the means and the end of SLAC sessions. By promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing among stakeholders, COPPEC aims to create a

sustainable framework for ongoing professional development and educational improvement (Wenger et al., 2002; Semertzaki cited in Hara, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The Learning Action Cell (LAC) as a cost-effective professional development strategy implemented by the Department of Education for all public-school teachers is considered beneficial and promotes collegial professional growth. Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that the implementation of LAC policy through School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) among schools in the BARMM has categorically improved their teachers' teaching and learning process and professional collaboration and ethics. The notion of communities of practice exists during SLAC sessions and those sessions have made some teachers more participative and motivated. Consequently, the school heads suggested a more frequent conduct of SLAC to ensure its impact on the teachers as well as a way to properly conduct monitoring and evaluation after the session. This calls for a more intensive and extensive approach to SLAC sessions which means a thorough and closer monitoring and evaluation and scheduling of the sessions that permits all teachers to actively participate without making excuses. This means either a monthly or quarterly implementation of SLAC.

With the different suggestions proposed by the school heads, the policy makers at the national down to division level necessitate a modification of certain provisions of the DepEd Order. This would ensure that the SLAC program is properly implemented and that its objectives or goals are achieved based on the contextualized needs of each region, division, and/or schools. On the other hand, the model that this study proposed implies a strong need to enhance and modify the existing theoretical framework of LAC and its guide on the implementation process. A LAC model that is more specific, explicit, and details the provisions that need to be addressed in order to successfully implement the program on a school-based level. The policy makers also must pay attention to and prioritize the resources needed by the school for SLAC sessions. Furthermore, while designing and implementation are key stages of the program, instructional supervision during monitoring and evaluation is equally fundamental as it determines the success of the program. Taken together, an effective implementation and monitoring and evaluation of SLAC implies a better academic performance among learners. Therefore, to invest in a teacher's professional development has to be a priority and a necessity.

Generally, this study not only advances the understanding of SLAC in the MBHTE - BARMM region but also provides actionable insights that can positively impact teaching practices, professional development, and educational policies. This holistic contribution has the potential to enhance the overall education landscape in the BARMM region and may serve as a model for other regions facing similar challenges.

Meanwhile, the model of SLAC generated from the findings of this study proposes a more specific means to assess SLAC sessions or implementation among schools in the Department of Education. This model, termed COPPEC (Community of Practice-based Planning, Execution, and Control), clearly describes the three phases of conducting SLAC, which begin from designing and planning, action implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. In each phase are the areas that SLAC leaders or education officials can measure or assess the success of the policy. This is in contrast to the LAC framework presented in the DepEd order, in which the latter is too general and lacks a clear guide and directions in conducting a professional development activity like SLAC. Therefore, this model can be proposed and submitted to the Ministry of Education in BARMM to inform them of this policy assessment that can be beneficial to all the education stakeholders, most especially, to the learners.

Finally, with the claim of this paper of a model that can be proposed for SLAC, further studies need to be conducted to corroborate the findings of this paper. Moreover, a survey questionnaire can be developed, pilot-tested, and undergo statistical analysis for its reliability and validity; and then be utilized to supplement the claims of the researchers. With the limitation of this paper, more studies should be conducted to extend this study or validate its findings.

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