RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tensions and Path Optimization in the Practice of the Learning Community Educational Philosophy: A Case Study of S Primary School

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of global educational transformation, the phenomenon of "high scores but low competence" has emerged as a critical issue within traditional education systems. As an emerging pedagogical paradigm, the learning-community model is regarded as a promising approach to address this dilemma. This study employs a case study method to evaluate the value of the learning-community approach, examining not only its practical advantages but also the structural challenges it faces, and proposes pathways for its optimization. This study takes S Primary School as a case study, located on China's southeastern coast. Through participatory observation, the research examines both the innovative mechanisms and the structural contradictions in the local application of the Learning Community model. Findings indicate that S Primary School has notably improved students' higher-order thinking and collaborative skills through reforms such as flexible scheduling, a threefold transformation of teacher roles, and the liberation of student discourse. However, the model faces deep-rooted challenges, including inadequate teacher capacity, inequities in differentiated instruction, and a disconnect between the model and the broader educational ecosystem. The study recommends the establishment of a professional support network for teachers, the development of tools for differentiated instruction, and coordinated reforms in evaluation to ensure the sustainable development of the Learning Community model.

Keywords: learning community, teaching model, Manabu Sato

1. Introduction

In recent years, core competencies have become a key focus in global education research and practice. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in its report Education 2030: Skills for the Future, stated that 21st-century education should go beyond mere knowledge transmission by fostering skills such as innovation, critical thinking, and collaboration to meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy. Although PISA data show that Chinese students excel in mathematics and

science, China's education system still has major shortcomings. It places too much emphasis on standardized testing, which limits students' creativity and fails to support the nation's goal of innovation (Yang, 2014). This exam-oriented approach, where students perform well on tests but struggle with creativity, highlights a deep disconnect between educational aims and modern demands (Tucker, 2014).

Against this backdrop, the concept of core competencies offers new directions for educational reform. It promotes a student-centered approach and calls for changes in learning methods, teaching strategies, and management systems. The goal is to

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shift education from a focus on knowledge to a focus on essential skills (Chu, 2016). For example, the European Union has identified eight key competencies, such as digital literacy, cultural awareness, and an innovative mindset (V et al., 2007). Similarly, the U.S.-based Partnership for 21st Century Skills encourages the integration of critical thinking and collaboration into curriculum design (Skills, 2011). These international experiences indicate that effectively implementing core competencies requires a fundamental shift in teaching methods.

In response to these challenges, Chinese primary and secondary schools have actively explored competitive teaching models, spurred by globalization and the internationalization of education. Among these, the Learning Community approach—which emphasizes collaboration, reflection, and active participation—has proven to be a key breakthrough in educational reform. International research indicates that learning communities can effectively improve students' socio-emotional skills and higher-order thinking abilities (Cole et al., 1978a; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For instance, Finland's Phenomenon-Based Learning, which uses interdisciplinary collaborative projects, has significantly enhanced students' innovative awareness (Pivovarova & Geiger, 2015). In Japan, the Listening Classroom model, proposed by scholar Manabu Sato, has rebalanced classroom power dynamics through equitable dialogue between teachers and students, leading to reforms in over 3,500 schools nationwide (Chen, 2018). Meanwhile, in China, an elementary school on the southeast coast—referred to as S School—pioneered a comprehensive classroom reform by adapting the learning community concept, providing a practical model to address the problem of high scores but low competence (Yu, 2019).

Nevertheless, the localization of the learning community model still faces multiple challenges. Research indicates that pressures from transforming teacher roles, the stratification of student abilities, and the inertia of traditional educational models may undermine reform efforts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017a; Fullan, 2005). For example, Hargreaves and O'Connor noted that collaborative teaching without systematic support tends to remain superficial (Mccollow, 2019). Similarly, Tomlinson's theory of differentiated instruction emphasizes that ignoring individual differences among students can worsen internal divisions within the community (Tomlinson & Pearson, 2005). Therefore, building a supportive ecosystem that balances innovation and equity is essential for the sustainable development of the learning community model.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of the "learning community" is rooted in the interdisciplinary fields of sociology and education. Ferdinand Tonnies first introduced the concept of community by distinguishing it from society as two basic forms of human organization (Tönnies, 2010). Later, John Dewey brought this idea into the realm of education. As a pioneer of progressive education, Dewey argued that education should help build a democratic society through shared community experiences (Dewey, 2007). Some scholars limit the idea to merely collaborative learning groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) or teacher professional development communities (Boyer, 1995), emphasizing only one aspect of its function or structure. In contrast, E. L. Boyer defines a learning community as "a dynamic organization in which all members are united by a common mission and vision, collaboratively exploring knowledge, sharing learning interests, and working together toward educational objectives through interaction and cooperation" (Boyer, 1997).

The evolution of learning communities has been shaped by Vygotsky's social interactionist constructivism and communities of practice theory. Vygotsky argued that social interaction is crucial for cognitive development, as students learn through engagement with more experienced peers and teachers (Cole et al., 1978b). Building on this idea, Mercer's research highlighted that exploratory classroom dialogue supports the internalization of

knowledge and improves students' metacognitive skills (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Pierre Dillenbourg further observed that collaborative learning not only transfers knowledge but also fosters cognitive development and enhances social skills. In technology-enhanced settings, practices such as resource sharing can optimize computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) and improve outcomes (Dillenbourg, 2000). These theoretical perspectives jointly underpin the formation of learning communities in schools.

The concept of "legitimate peripheral participation," introduced by Lave and Wenger, further guides the development of learning communities. Lave proposed that learning is a process of social participation in which individuals gradually move from peripheral to core roles within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger added that a community's effectiveness depends on three elements: Joint Enterprise, Mutual Engagement, and Shared Repertoire. He stressed that many valuable learning experiences occur in informal contexts. According to Wenger, schools should model authentic communities of practice rather than merely transmit abstract knowledge. In this model, teachers become facilitators who assist students in negotiating meaning and constructing their identities (Wenger, 1998). Grossman and colleagues also noted that teacher learning communities (TLCs) can improve instructional design and foster interdisciplinary integration (Grossman et al., 2001). The application of the community concept has expanded further, as seen in the work of Japanese curriculum scholar Manabu Sato, who applied it to the student learning process.

Sato is a prominent advocate of the learning community model in East Asia. In 1997, he proposed this model to address issues such as student demotivation, lack of learning purpose, and avoidance behaviors in Japanese education. His proposal sparked educational reforms in several Asian countries, including Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, and China (Yu, 2017). Drawing from Japanese educational practice, Sato introduced the

Listening Classroom model. This approach creates a "nurturing classroom" through balanced dialogue between teachers and students (Manabu Sato, 2010). Its main goal is to shift the role of teachers from knowledge authorities to learning collaborators, promoting deep learning through active listening and reflection.

Today, the establishment of learning communities is influenced by social cognitive psychology, communities of practice theory, and the concept of dialogic curriculum implementation. In Finland, interdisciplinary projects such as phenomenon-based learning have restructured classrooms to emphasize student-driven problem solving and collaborative inquiry (Sahlberg, 2011). PISA data confirm that Finnish students excel in collaborative problem-solving, a success attributed to high teacher autonomy and individualized assessment systems (Välijärvi et al., 2002). In contrast, project-based learning (PBL) predominates in the United States, as exemplified by High Tech High schools. Research shows that PBL can significantly boost students' creativity and career readiness (Thomas, 2000), although its success depends on the deep integration of school and community resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017b). In East Asia, local practices largely build on Sato's framework, offering promising solutions for challenges such as Japan's "Lost Generation" crisis. Educators in China, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan Province of China have examined these approaches, and Sato has visited community schools in China to engage in collaborative exploration and co-construction.

More specifically, in the Chinese context, nationwide curriculum reforms have not only equipped the education system with the capacity to respond to the challenges and opportunities of globalization, but have also imposed significant pressures on teachers—ranging from role redefinition and pedagogical adjustments to the reconstruction of professional identity(Guo, 2013). However, research has shown that despite the student-centered philosophy promoted by these reforms, teachers in

practice often revert to traditional teacher-centered instruction, revealing the deep-seated inertia of conventional educational models (Li et al., 2011). The learning-community teaching model has already been the subject of substantial applied research in China, including studies on virtual communities based on online platforms (Lv and Zhang, 2010) and the integration of community-based approaches into specific subjects such as ideological and political education (Yi, 2013).

As an intern teacher, the author conducted an in-depth, three-month participatory observation at a community school. During this period, the author engaged in extensive dialogue with the mentor teacher, amassed ten hours of interview recordings, and kept daily observation journals throughout March. These data provide the essential empirical foundation for the present study. Through this sustained engagement, the author systematically examined the strengths and limitations of the learning-community model within Chinese educational practice, offering a Chinese case study to the global scholarship on learning communities and advancing the sustainable development of learning-community pedagogy. Furthermore, given the high quality of China's basic education and the deep influence of Eastern Confucian examination culture, this study may offer valuable insights for scholars of East Asian educational practices.

3. Finding

3.1 Advantage

As the sample institution for this study, S Elementary School has implemented the learning-community model since its founding in 2014. It has built a robust person–activity–environment ecosystem that involves students, teachers, and the campus. The school also maintains an international orientation through regular teacher exchange visits to regions such as Japan and Taiwan. Professor Sato has visited School S several times to conduct research and deliver lectures. As a result, School S is regarded as one of the most representative examples in mainland China of a school implementing the learning community concept.

The establishment of a learning community requires not only a shift in the educational perspectives of teachers and students but also poses challenges for school management, curriculum scheduling, and instructional time allocation. With explicit limits on school hours set by the Chinese government, the reform at School S focuses on adjustments within each class period. Specifically, the school has constructed its learning community through the following strategies: (1) the reallocation of instructional time, (2) the redefinition of teachers' teaching responsibilities, (3) the reconfiguration of classroom layouts, and (4) the reconstruction of campus spaces.

3.1.1 Quantified reconstruction of time allocation: from unidirectional transmission to generative dialogue

School S restructured its instructional sequence following collaborative learning theory and subject-specific principles. First, it adopted flexible scheduling by compressing the standard class period to 30 minutes and combining long and short lessons tailored to each subject. The duration of teacher lectures was strictly limited so that students assume greater leadership in class. As a result, self-directed inquiry and group discussion now account for over 60% of classroom time. This adjustment draws on Sato's theory of "listening education," which holds that silence and waiting are essential for deep learning. After a teacher poses a question, students reflect individually and discuss within groups before reaching a whole-class consensus through the sequence: problem posing – individual reflection – inter-group debate – consensus building.

3.1.2 Paradigm shift in teachers' roles: from authoritative control to professional support

The school has redefined teacher roles in three stages. First, teachers have shifted from lecturers to listeners. Traditional questioning is now replaced with prompts that guide thinking, such as "Discuss with your peers to explore alternative ideas," "Read it aloud to a classmate," or "Listen carefully—can

your classmates' ideas inspire you?" Second, teachers have moved from evaluators to collaborators by incorporating peer assessment and "learning logs" to support formative evaluation (Schuetze et al., 2018). Research suggests that peer assessment can improve metacognitive abilities, although its success depends on clear evaluation criteria (Brookhart, 2013). Third, teachers have become observers rather than controllers. They have abandoned one-way instruction in favor of classroom observation techniques that document student interaction patterns and enable dynamic grouping strategies.

3.1.3 Systematic reconstruction of the learning ecology: liberating students' voices

Existing studies show that East Asian learners, influenced by Confucian culture, often display passivity in class discussions (Clark & Gieve, 2006). This passivity is linked to cultural practices that value group face-saving and suppress individual expression (Chan & Sally, 1999). In contrast, School S employs safe speech protocols (such as error-free zones and respect for silence) to encourage students to express uncertainty. For example, in mathematics classes it is common for a student to remark, "I think the third solution might have a flaw, but I'm not sure." Such statements reduce face anxiety and allow cognitive conflicts to emerge publicly, thereby facilitating deep learning. The classroom layout has also been transformed from traditional rows to a U-shaped configuration, with a central aisle serving as a highway. This design not only shortens the distance between teachers and students but also enhances communication and interaction. The rearranged setting supports social constructivist theory by emphasizing the importance of proximal interactions in knowledge construction.

3.1.4 Reconstruction of the campus environment: the embodied third teacher

The school's material environment plays a crucial role in constructing a learning community. It serves three educational functions (Higgins et al., 2005). First, corridors dynamically display student creations—such as clay works, tie-dye crafts, calligraphy, and paintings—which reflect student

agency and stimulate collaborative motivation and cross-grade knowledge sharing (Cook-Sather, 2006). Second, classrooms now include collaborative stations equipped with tablets and experimental tools. A monthly rotational system of shared book boxes across classes creates a resource network aligned with distributed cognition theory (Hutchins, 1995), demonstrating that learning results from the interaction among tools, environments, and individuals. Third, a teacher community has been established to promote collective professional growth. Teacher offices are equipped with cork bulletin walls where educators post questions and challenges for informal discussion. Moreover, teachers from different grades and subjects routinely observe each other's classes and organize post-class discussion salons. This culture of collective learnin greinforces the overall community ethos.

As one of the earliest model schools in mainland China to implement Sato's educational philosophy, School S has consistently pursued a learning community framework centered on person–activity–environment since its founding in 2014. By reorganizing instructional time, transforming teacher roles, reconstructing classroom ecology, and renovating campus spaces, the school has significantly improved students' autonomous learning abilities, enhanced teachers' professional support capacities, and optimized its overall campus culture. International exchanges have further enriched these initiatives. This case not only demonstrates the adaptive innovation of the learning community theory within the Chinese cultural context but also offers a transferable paradigm for addressing the challenges inherent in East Asian education. However, as a participatory observer, the researcher has also identified several potential challenges. As a school that has embraced the learning-community model since its founding, it nevertheless continues to grapple with tensions common in the broader educational landscape—particularly the conflict between teachers' classroom practices and entrenched traditional pedagogical beliefs. These challenges become even

more pronounced and urgent when the target group is elementary school students, highlighting the critical need to resolve such issues in order to ensure the model's effectiveness and sustainability.

3.2 Disadvantage

Despite the significant educational value demonstrated by the learning community model, its local implementation faces three structural contradictions that reflect the inherent complexity of systemic educational reform.

3.2.1 Heightened demands on teachers' professional competence

First, a conflict exists between curriculum design and compressed instructional time. Educators at School S, long used to 45-minute classes, face a marked "teaching habit discontinuity" when classes are shortened to 30 minutes. The reduced time forces teachers into "subtractive teaching," requiring them to focus on core knowledge while eliminating extra content. Without sufficient experience in integrating curricula and grasping the subject holistically, teachers may fall into fragmented instruction.

Second, there is a systematic lack of collaborative lesson planning. In the absence of a standardized curriculum framework, teachers must develop interdisciplinary projects independently—a task that challenges their preparatory skills. Although educators at School S have strong disciplinary knowledge from traditional training, many have limited experience with collaborative design. International evidence suggests that professional learning communities (PLCs), through collective lesson planning and lesson study, can help ease these pressures (Stoll et al., 2006).

Third, a new evaluation mechanism is needed. The conventional system, which focuses on instructional hours and test scores, does not account for the extra time teachers invest in observation and feedback under the learning community model. New student evaluation criteria are necessary to capture the subtle progress of diverse learners.

3.2.2 Challenges to fairness in differentiated instruction

The learning community model must balance individual learning differences within an inclusive education context. However, practice at School S shows tensions between individual and collective learning. Although Sato emphasizes that "individual learning is the starting point of a community," mixed-ability groups may cause students with special needs to withdraw under high cognitive load. In mathematics classes, higher-achieving and average students often dominate, leaving some peers isolated. Even with a dedicated resource room for special education, regular classrooms still lack personalized support tools. In addition, strong "face-saving" norms in East Asian cultures may further inhibit students from asking questions, hindering full participation.

3.2.3 Conflicts within the educational ecosystem

Ideally, families, schools, and society should work as a unified force. In reality, the novel learning community model is vulnerable to external pressures. Many parents remain focused on exam outcomes, fearing that reduced homework will harm academic performance, and they often rely on supplementary tutoring that follows the traditional "lecture–practice–test" model. This external tutoring, isolated from in-school practices, can undermine the learning community. Even in Japan, only a few learning community schools have established robust home–school collaborations. Moreover, although School S mainly uses formative evaluation methods, regional standardized exams still guide assessment, forcing the school to balance innovation with exam preparation.

Conclusion

The localized practice of the learning community model underscores its core value: by reconfiguring time and space and transforming traditional power dynamics, it shifts the focus from "knowledge transmission" to "competence cultivation." The innovative experience at School S validates Sato's listening education approach—transitioning from teacher-led instruction to dialogue-driven learning and redefining teachers' roles from authoritative controllers to professional

supporters who empower student voices.

Nonetheless, the study also reveals three critical contradictions: (1) a paradox in teacher professional competence, where the inertia of traditional teaching clashes with the demands for collaborative instruction—an issue that necessitates combined efforts from teacher education institutions and ongoing professional training; (2) the implicit stratification within mixed-ability groups, which urgently requires the development of more effective and equitable scaffolding for differentiated learning; and (3) conflicts within the broader educational ecosystem that call for the establishment of a collaborative governance mechanism among families, schools, and society, in order to reconstruct the educational environment and foster a synergistic evolution of educational practices.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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