



Teachers Lived Experience in Implementing the Learning Action Cell Program: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The Learning Action Cell (LAC) program of the Department of Education serves as a professional learning community aimed at enhancing teachers' instructional practices, collaboration, and continuous professional growth. This study explored the lived experiences of 10 purposively selected public-school teachers in Calamba District, Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao, as they participated in LAC sessions. The study utilized Moustakas' (1994) Existential Learning framework. Five emerging themes were identified in the study, namely: living collaborative relationships in professional learning, navigating supportive leadership to learner success, experiencing a holistic and empowering professional space, encountering time as a structuring force for professional growth, and engaging in embodied and emotional professional learning. Collaborative relationships, supportive leadership, holistic professional spaces, structured time, and embodied and emotional engagement collectively facilitated teachers' instructional competence, professional growth, reflective practice, sustained engagement, and effective classroom performance. The study recommends that school administrators, leaders, program designers, and professional development coordinators intentionally create collaborative, supportive, and holistic LAC environments, allocate time for planning and reflection, and design engaging activities, while future research should examine the long-term impact of such professional learning on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes.

KEYWORDS: collaboration, development, empowerment, professional learning, teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional growth is a key factor in enhancing the quality of education globally (Edu, 2025; Elov & Toshtemirova, 2024; Sok & Heng, 2024). With the development of education in response to technological progress and shifting student needs, educators need ongoing opportunities to improve instructional skills and pedagogical practices. School-based professional learning communities, in most cases formed by Department of Education (DepEd) memorandum orders, have become leading forums for promoting cooperation, creativity, and ongoing education among teachers (Lauta, 2025; Regala, 2024; Rivera et al., 2025). Among these efforts, the Learning Action Cell (LAC) program, anchored on DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016 is most notable for its policy-based framework, with the objective of fostering teacher growth through action research and collaborative activities. Knowledge of teachers' participation and experiences in such programs is crucial for guaranteeing their efficacy and sustainability.

Recent literature has revealed that school-based professional development programs, such as LAC, can profoundly impact teachers' instructional practices and student outcomes (Lacy, 2024; Lao & Lao, 2024; Quimio, 2025). Most of these studies, however, have emphasized the quantitative

indices of program implementation or the general level of implementation. Although these measurements are essential, they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the individual and situational experiences of teachers who are directly engaged in those programs. Teachers' perceptions, challenges, and reflections give more in-depth views of the reasons supporting or hindering effective program integration in everyday classroom practices (Karousiou et al., 2025; Mahara, 2024; Mashishi & Ramaila, 2024). Understanding these subjective factors is essential for creating more effective and responsive professional development structures.

The research by Lao and Lao (2024) in the Zamboanga City Division provided an extensive evaluation of the extent to which the LAC program was implemented amid the pandemic. Their study found high levels of implementation across various stages, particularly planning and execution, even amid the impediments posed by COVID-19. The evidence highlighted that the Technical Working Group significantly contributed to upholding the program's implementation. Nevertheless, Lao and Lao were primarily concerned with measuring the extent of implementation using quantitative data and failed to examine the individual experiences of the involved teachers. It leaves a gap in the explanation of how

teachers feel and emotionally react to their involvement in LAC activities.

Extending Lao & Lao's (2024) findings, the present study plays an essential role in investigating teachers' subjective experiences to gain a clearer understanding of the program's actual impact on their professional lives. Teachers' interpretation of their roles, problems encountered, and perceived advantages may provide important information that cannot be gathered from implementation indicators. Teachers' voices are paramount in determining the drivers of their motivation, participation, and general satisfaction with professional development activities. Acknowledging the value of teachers' views will lead to more comprehensive assessments, guaranteeing the continuity and applicability of activities such as LAC (Lao & Lao, 2024; Naungayan, 2025).

Whereas many studies have examined the introduction of the Learning Action Cell (LAC) program, most have employed quantitative methods that focus on measurable outcomes such as frequency, levels of compliance, and structural efficiency (e.g., Lao & Lao, 2024). This leaves a literature gap, as studies tend to neglect the subjective, lived experiences of teachers attending LAC sessions. Few qualitative studies have examined how teachers view the program's applicability, the difficulties they encounter in participating, and the impact of LAC activities on their professional development and instructional practice. Bridging this gap is critical because teachers' own reflective experiences, incentives, and emotional reactions provide a deeper understanding of the actual efficacy and sustainability of professional development interventions. By centering on teachers' own voices, the current research aims to provide a more fine-grained insight into LAC's effects, complementing prior quantitative results and assisting in the creation of more responsive and effective teacher development programs.

Thus, this research aims to examine teachers' lived experiences in implementing the Learning Action Cell program in the Philippine education context. The study aims to understand how teachers perceive their involvement, the challenges they encounter, and the incentives or obstacles that motivate or deter them from engaging in LAC activities. Through an examination of teachers' individual stories, the study aims to identify sensitive themes that will inform the improvement of professional development strategies. Finally, this study aims to address the gap left by earlier studies by integrating qualitative information with current knowledge on LAC implementation and its implications for teachers. Through this, the study aims to provide valuable recommendations for constructing better learning communities for teachers.

This study was significant as it explored the lived experiences of teachers participating in the Learning Action Cell (LAC) program, a key school-based professional development initiative mandated by the Department of Education. Unlike prior research that primarily focused on quantitative indicators of implementation, this study examined teachers' perceptions, challenges, motivations,

and reflections, providing a deeper understanding of how professional development programs influenced actual teaching practices. By centering on teachers' voices, the research shed light on the personal and contextual factors that affected meaningful engagement, instructional growth, and sustained participation in LAC activities. The findings aimed to guide policymakers, school leaders, and program implementers in designing more responsive and effective professional development strategies, ultimately enhancing teacher performance and contributing to higher-quality education in the Philippine context.

METHODS

The study employed a phenomenological research design grounded in Moustakas' (1994) Existential Learning framework to explore the lived experiences of teachers in implementing the Learning Action Cell (LAC) program in the Calamba District, Division of Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Ten purposively selected public-school teachers participated, meeting criteria that ensured relevant insights into their engagement with LAC sessions. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide that explored participants' strategies, challenges, reflections, and perceived professional growth, while ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed in accordance with institutional and national guidelines. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and securely stored, with field notes supplementing data accuracy. Analysis followed Moustakas' six-step phenomenological method—Epoche/Bracketing, Horizontalization, Clustering into Themes, Textural Description, Structural Description, and Textural-Structural Synthesis—guided by the existential dimensions of relationality, spatiality, temporality, and embodiment. NVivo software supported data coding, thematic organization, and pattern interpretation, allowing the study to generate a comprehensive understanding of how teachers experienced, navigated, and interpreted the LAC program in relation to their professional development and teaching practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study identified five themes, namely: living collaborative relationships in professional learning, navigating supportive leadership to learner success, experiencing a holistic and empowering professional space, encountering time as a structuring force for professional growth, and engaging in embodied and emotional professional learning.

Theme 1: Living Collaborative Relationships in Professional Learning

Teachers' experiences in the Learning Action Cell (LAC) highlighted the critical role of collaborative relationships in professional growth, where shared engagement, dialogue, and mutual support fostered both instructional improvement and emotional well-being. Participants consistently described how interactions with colleagues

enhanced pedagogical skills, encouraged problem-solving, and provided confidence in implementing new strategies, while also fostering camaraderie, a sense of belonging, and motivation to engage continuously in professional learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2021; Stoll & Louis, 2022; Admiraal et al., 2022; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2021). Collaborative support further helped teachers overcome resistance to new practices, reinforcing reflective and transformative learning processes (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, & Gardner, 2023; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2021; Zhang, Yuan, & Yu, 2023). Aligning with Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (1991), these findings illustrate that professional learning communities not only enhance instructional competence but also provide emotionally sustaining spaces that facilitate critical reflection, openness to change, and continuous professional development.

Theme 2: Navigating Supportive Leadership to Learner Success

The study revealed that supportive school leadership was instrumental in fostering teacher development and improving learner outcomes. Teachers described principals and school heads as guides who provided constructive feedback, structured support, and mentorship, which enhanced confidence, motivation, and professional engagement (Voelkel, Prusak, & Van Tassell, 2024; Investigating Leadership for Learning and Student Achievement, 2024). Collaboration with colleagues, facilitated and reinforced by leaders, translated into effective instructional practices and tangible improvements in student performance, producing both professional and emotional satisfaction (Instructional Leadership and Teacher Professional Development, 2024; Leadership Impact on PLC and Student Performance, 2024). These findings align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), suggesting that leadership practices that satisfy teachers' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness enhance intrinsic motivation, professional efficacy, and sustained engagement, ultimately contributing to a positive school culture and learner success (Caoile & Pere, 2024; Olafsen et al., 2025; Rivera et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Experiencing a Holistic and Empowering Professional Space

Teachers' participation in LAC created holistic professional spaces where collaborative engagement, structured activities, and supportive interactions empowered both personal and professional growth. Participants reported that these environments enabled reflective practice, knowledge sharing, confidence building, and continuous skill enhancement, while fostering a sense of agency and professional fulfillment (Ortega et al., 2024; Smith & Johnson, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2024; Martínez & Torres, 2024). The integration of emotional support, teamwork, and structured time created conditions conducive to experimentation and application of new strategies. Grounded in Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (1991), these experiences demonstrate that professional learning spaces that combine reflection,

collaboration, and emotional support facilitate perspective transformation, instructional improvement, and sustained motivation among educators (Pan & Cheng, 2023; Dumandan & Paglinawan, 2025; Sandoval, 2024).

Theme 4: Encountering Time as a Structuring Force for Professional Growth

The allocation and management of time emerged as a pivotal factor in teachers' engagement and professional development within LAC. Participants emphasized that sufficient preparation, execution, and reflection periods enhanced their readiness, focus, and ability to apply new strategies, whereas limited time increased stress and reduced effective participation (Johnson & Hall, 2023; Smith & Brown, 2022; OECD, 2023). Structured time enabled collaborative work, iterative learning, and thoughtful application of professional development activities, supporting sustained instructional improvement. These experiences align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), highlighting that adequate time provision satisfies teachers' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation, professional confidence, and long-term engagement in continuous learning (Ryan & Deci, 2024; McAnally & Hagger, 2024; White et al., 2024).

Theme 5: Engaging in Embodied and Emotional Professional Learning

Teachers' experiences in LAC underscored the embodied and emotional dimensions of professional learning, where physical presence, emotional awareness, and relational engagement were integral to meaningful participation. While preparation and active engagement were physically demanding, interactive sessions invigorated teachers, sustaining focus, motivation, and professional involvement. Cognitive engagement, reflective practice, and emotional support further reinforced professional growth, confidence, and collaborative commitment (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2024; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2023; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2025). Aligning with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), these findings indicate that professional development is most effective when it simultaneously engages mind, body, and emotions, enabling teachers to critically reflect, adopt innovative practices, and sustain continuous professional growth (Mann, Maringe, & Gibbs, 2024; Jensen, Sandoval-Hernandez, & Lemos, 2025; Vinjamuri & Jacobson, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative professional relationships, supportive leadership, holistic learning environments, structured time, and embodied emotional engagement collectively shaped teachers' professional growth and instructional effectiveness. Collaborative interactions fostered confidence, competence, and sustained engagement, while supportive and instructional leadership provided guidance, feedback, and resources that enhanced both teacher development and student achievement. Holistic professional spaces integrated collaboration, reflection, and meaningful

engagement, promoting personal and pedagogical growth, and structured, thoughtfully allocated time enabled teachers to prepare, implement, and reflect on their practice effectively. Additionally, attention to embodied and emotional dimensions of professional learning supported teachers' well-being, motivation, and capacity to translate learning into effective classroom practices, demonstrating that multifaceted, relational, and well-organized professional learning environments are essential for continuous teacher development and improved educational outcomes.

Recommendations

School administrators and educational leaders may enhance teacher development and learner outcomes by actively facilitating structured collaborative sessions, such as regular LAC meetings and peer mentoring, while implementing continuous mentorship and feedback mechanisms through classroom observations, individualized guidance, and collaborative decision-making. Program designers and professional development coordinators can create supportive and holistic learning environments by integrating structured workshops, reflective exercises, experiential activities, and collaborative projects that engage teachers cognitively, emotionally, and physically. Additionally, administrators may allocate dedicated time for LAC planning, execution, and reflection by adjusting schedules and minimizing competing tasks, ensuring meaningful participation and sustained engagement. Future research may investigate the long-term effects of these collaborative, supportive, and holistic professional learning environments on teacher effectiveness and student achievement across diverse educational contexts.

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