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Unpacking Learning Action Cell: A Systematic Review of Challenges and Opportunities of Key Players In Basic Education

Charess Dela Cruz Rustia

Cantapoy National High School, Cantapoy, Malimono, Surigao del Norte, Philippines
Email: charess.rustia@deped.gov.ph
ORCID ID: 0009-0006-0665-7267

Abstract

This study conducted a qualitative systematic review of empirical research on the implementation of the Learning Action Cell (LAC) in Philippine basic education. Institutionalized through DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2016, the LAC was designed as a school-based professional development strategy aimed at strengthening teacher collaboration and reflective practice. Using the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a total of 21 studies published between 2016 and 2024 were identified, screened, and thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. The findings revealed three central strands: challenges, opportunities, and impacts on teaching efficiency. The review highlighted persistent challenges such as inadequate facilitator training, scheduling and workload conflicts, limited resources in rural schools, and weak monitoring systems. At the same time, it underscored enabling opportunities, including improved teacher collaboration, increased professional confidence, and the fostering of reflective practice. Evidence further indicated that LAC participation enhanced teaching efficiency by supporting the application of differentiated instruction, integration of digital tools, and improved classroom management. The study also found that LAC effectiveness was strongly influenced by contextual variables such as topic relevance, facilitator competence, leadership support, and resource availability. Overall, the findings affirm that the LAC is a promising framework for professional development but one that requires stronger policy enforcement, facilitator training, and equitable resource provision to ensure sustainability. The study recommends strengthening institutional support, aligning session content with teachers' instructional needs, and conducting further research on the direct impact of LAC on student learning outcomes.

Keywords: Learning Action Cell (LAC); Professional Development; Teacher Collaboration; Basic Education; Systematic Review; Thematic Analysis; Philippines

1. Introduction

The continuous evolution of education has emphasized the central role of teacher professional development in ensuring quality learning outcomes. In the Philippine context, the Department of Education institutionalized the Learning Action Cell (LAC) through DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2016, positioning it as a school-based continuing professional development strategy under the K to 12 Basic Education Program. The LAC was intended to establish collaborative spaces where teachers could engage in reflective practice, share effective instructional strategies, and address school-based concerns collectively. This approach aligns with Republic Act 10533, otherwise known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, which mandates continuing professional growth of teachers as an integral part of education reform (Department of Education, 2016).

Globally, models of collaborative professional development such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the United States, Lesson Study in Japan, and School Learning Communities in Finland have demonstrated the importance of peer-driven learning and reflective teaching practices (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021;

Yada et al., 2023). These models emphasize the effectiveness of professional learning that is grounded in collaboration, shared accountability, and contextualized classroom practices. Within the Philippines, the LAC reflects these international best practices but remains distinctive in its grounding within the public school system and the explicit support of DepEd policy frameworks.

Despite its promise, the implementation of LAC in the Philippines has been marked by both successes and challenges. Research has highlighted recurring issues such as inadequate facilitator preparation, scheduling conflicts, weak monitoring mechanisms, and the lack of alignment between session topics and actual teacher needs (Vega, 2020; Lao & Lao, 2024). Conversely, opportunities such as improved teacher collaboration, peer support, and enhanced classroom instruction have been documented, indicating that the program has potential to significantly impact teacher professional growth and student learning outcomes (Aquino et al., 2023; Bartolay et al., 2024).

The growing body of literature on LAC underscores the need for a systematic synthesis of findings to provide a more holistic understanding of its implementation across diverse contexts. Previous studies tend to focus on isolated elements—such as topic relevance, teacher perceptions, or leadership support—without consolidating evidence into a cohesive framework. This creates a research gap where fragmented findings obscure a comprehensive picture of LAC's impact on teaching efficiency and its sustainability as a professional development mechanism.

Rationale

The present study undertakes a systematic review of empirical studies on LAC implementation in the Philippines from 2016 to 2024. The rationale for this review lies in the necessity to unify dispersed research findings, identify persistent challenges, and highlight enabling factors that enhance the effectiveness of LAC. Anchored on Guskey's Five Levels of Professional Development Evaluation (2000) and Constructivist Learning Theory, the study aims to analyze how LAC sessions contribute to teacher growth and, ultimately, student learning outcomes.

By synthesizing 21 studies, this review aspires to present evidence-based insights that can guide policy refinement, strengthen institutional support mechanisms, and promote more effective professional development strategies in Philippine schools. The findings are expected to inform policymakers, school administrators, and educators in maximizing the benefits of LAC, ensuring that it not only supports teacher collaboration but also enhances instructional practices and student performance. In doing so, the study addresses the broader national goal of improving the quality of education as mandated by RA 10533 and aligns with global standards of teacher professional learning.

Aim of the Study

The study aimed to systematically review empirical research on the implementation of Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions in Philippine basic education. Specifically, it sought to examine the recurring challenges and opportunities encountered by educators, and to evaluate how these factors influence teaching efficiency and professional growth. Through this review, the study also intended to propose a structured paradigm that strengthens the sustainability of LAC as a school-based professional development strategy aligned with Republic Act 10533 and DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2016.

Research Questions

To achieve this aim, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the common challenges teachers face during the implementation of LAC sessions as identified across multiple studies?

- 2. What are the consistent opportunities reported in the implementation of LAC sessions?
- 3. To what extent does LAC session implementation improve teaching efficiency according to aggregated study data?
- 4. How do variables such as topic selection, facilitator training, and school context influence the effectiveness of LAC sessions

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded on **Guskey's Five Levels of Professional Development Evaluation (2000)**, a framework that has been widely utilized in assessing the effectiveness of teacher professional development programs. The model provides a structured way of examining how professional learning initiatives, such as the Learning Action Cell (LAC), create impact across multiple dimensions. The first level focuses on participants' reactions, which refer to the immediate responses of teachers to the LAC sessions in terms of usefulness, relevance, and facilitation. The second level measures participants' learning, which includes the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and pedagogical insights. The third level examines organizational support and change, highlighting how institutional mechanisms, policies, and leadership either strengthen or weaken the implementation of LAC. The fourth level considers the extent to which participants apply new knowledge and skills in their classroom practice, while the fifth level explores student learning outcomes, which represent the ultimate measure of professional development impact. By using Guskey's model, the study ensured that its synthesis was comprehensive, taking into account not only the experiences of teachers but also the institutional context and the outcomes for students.

Complementing Guskey's evaluation model, the study was also informed by Constructivist Learning Theory, particularly the ideas of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey, which emphasize that learning is an active, contextualized, and socially mediated process. Constructivism reinforces the idea that teachers learn most effectively through experiences, dialogue, and reflection, rather than passive reception of knowledge. Applied to the LAC framework, this perspective highlights that professional development must go beyond the simple transfer of information and instead provide opportunities for teachers to co-construct knowledge, critically reflect on their practices, and adapt strategies to their unique classroom contexts. The dual theoretical anchoring of Guskey's model and Constructivist Learning Theory thus provided a strong foundation for the study, ensuring that the evaluation of LAC implementation captured both its measurable outcomes and its deeper philosophical commitment to collaborative and reflective teacher learning.

Conceptual Framework

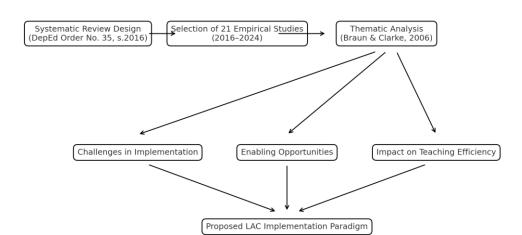


Figure 2. Operational Framework of the Study

Figure 1. Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the operational framework of the study, which demonstrates the systematic flow of how the research was carried out. It begins with the systematic review design, grounded on DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2016, which provided the methodological basis for examining Learning Action Cell (LAC) implementation in Philippine basic education. The next stage involves the selection of 21 empirical studies conducted between 2016 and 2024, which served as the evidence base for analysis. These studies were then subjected to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, which allowed the identification and refinement of recurring themes across contexts.

From this process, three major strands emerged, namely: challenges in implementation, enabling opportunities, and the impact on teaching efficiency. These strands encapsulate the essential findings of the synthesis and directly address the research questions posed in the study. The framework ultimately leads to the proposed LAC implementation paradigm, which integrates the evidence into a structured model that can inform future professional development policies and practices.

This figure demonstrates the logical sequence of how the study moved from evidence gathering, to analysis, and finally to conceptual output, thereby ensuring methodological rigor and coherence in addressing the problem under investigation.

2. Review of Related Literature

The role of teacher professional development in shaping instructional quality and student learning outcomes has been extensively discussed in global education literature. Research emphasizes that continuous, collaborative, and context-sensitive professional learning is critical for sustaining quality education (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Models such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the United States, Lesson Study in Japan, and Teacher Learning Communities in Finland highlight the importance of reflective practice, peer collaboration, and collective accountability in enhancing teacher performance (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Kim et al.,

2021). These frameworks provide a useful lens for understanding the Learning Action Cell (LAC) in the Philippines, which functions as a school-based professional development model contextualized for the country's basic education system.

In the Philippine context, the LAC was institutionalized under DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2016, as a strategy to support the Enhanced Basic Education Act (Republic Act 10533, 2013). The purpose was to create structured opportunities for teachers to collaborate, share pedagogical practices, and address school-based challenges through peer-led sessions. Several studies documented its relevance in addressing the professional development gap in public schools, particularly in remote areas where access to formal training programs is limited (Vega, 2020; Bartolay et al., 2024). LAC was envisioned as an embedded system of continuing professional growth aligned with global best practices but uniquely designed for the Philippine educational context.

Despite this promise, LAC implementation has encountered notable challenges. Studies identified issues such as the absence of trained facilitators, limited administrative and technical support, time constraints due to heavy teaching loads, and poor alignment of session topics with actual teacher needs (Aquino et al., 2023; Lao & Lao, 2024). These findings align with international literature, which shows that professional learning communities often struggle with sustainability when there is inadequate leadership, institutional support, or resource allocation (Riveros et al., 2021; Hairon, 2022). In the Philippine setting, such constraints have hindered the maximization of LAC's potential as a mechanism for continuous teacher growth.

At the same time, the literature reveals significant opportunities provided by LAC. Several studies noted that teachers experienced improved collaboration, stronger peer support networks, and enhanced confidence in applying new teaching strategies after participating in sessions (Gonzales & Relos, 2022; Bartolay et al., 2024). In some cases, LAC helped teachers bridge theory and practice by contextualizing learning strategies for their classrooms. These outcomes mirror international evidence that collaborative professional development is most effective when grounded in authentic teaching experiences and collegial reflection (Stoll, 2020; Opfer & Pedder, 2021).

Another critical dimension emphasized in the literature is the link between professional development and teaching efficiency. Guskey (2000) argued that meaningful professional learning must translate into improved student outcomes, which provides justification for embedding LAC within broader educational reforms. Although Philippine studies largely focus on teacher perceptions, there is growing recognition that LAC's long-term success should be measured by its impact on classroom instruction and learner performance. This suggests the need for more empirical research that directly connects LAC participation with measurable improvements in student achievement.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that while LAC has been institutionalized as a promising school-based professional development approach in the Philippines, its effectiveness remains uneven. Challenges related to facilitation, support, and sustainability continue to hinder full implementation. However, opportunities exist in leveraging its collaborative strengths, building teacher capacity, and aligning LAC with both local needs and global professional development standards. These gaps in research and practice provided the rationale for conducting the present systematic review, which sought to consolidate existing findings, identify persistent issues, and propose a paradigm for more effective LAC implementation.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative systematic review design to synthesize existing empirical evidence on the implementation of Learning Action Cell (LAC) in Philippine basic education. A systematic review was deemed appropriate because it allows for the transparent and rigorous collection, appraisal, and synthesis of published research to generate a consolidated understanding of a phenomenon (Snyder, 2019). Unlike traditional literature reviews that provide a narrative overview, systematic reviews follow explicit procedures for identifying, screening,

and analyzing relevant studies. In this case, the review sought to consolidate fragmented findings on LAC to uncover recurring challenges, opportunities, and impacts on teaching efficiency, thereby producing evidence-based recommendations.

The inclusion criteria required that studies (a) were conducted between 2016 and 2024, reflecting the period after the institutionalization of LAC under DepEd Order No. 35, series of 2016; (b) specifically examined the implementation of LAC sessions in Philippine basic education; (c) were empirical in nature, employing either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches; and (d) were published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or graduate theses and dissertations accessible through institutional repositories. Studies were excluded if they (a) focused on teacher professional development programs unrelated to LAC, (b) were purely theoretical or opinion-based articles, or (c) lacked sufficient methodological detail for quality appraisal.

The search strategy involved accessing academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and institutional repositories of Philippine higher education institutions. The keywords used included "Learning Action Cell," "teacher professional development Philippines," and "DepEd Order No. 35, s.2016." Boolean operators were applied to refine search combinations, and manual searches were conducted to ensure inclusion of grey literature relevant to the topic. This process resulted in an initial pool of 58 studies. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 21 studies were retained for final analysis.

To ensure rigor, the study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. The PRISMA framework facilitated a structured reporting of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases, which enhanced the transparency and replicability of the review (Page et al., 2021). Each included study was assessed for methodological quality using criteria adapted from critical appraisal tools, ensuring that only credible and relevant sources contributed to the synthesis.

The retained studies were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This involved (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final synthesis. Coding was conducted manually to identify recurring patterns related to challenges, opportunities, and impacts of LAC implementation. Themes were then cross-validated by revisiting the primary studies to ensure alignment with the original findings.

Throughout the review process, ethical considerations were observed. Since the study involved secondary data, there were no direct participants; however, the principles of academic integrity and proper attribution were strictly followed. All studies included in the synthesis were duly cited, and the review process adhered to standards of transparency, accuracy, and fairness.

4. Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1

What are the common challenges teachers face during the implementation of LAC sessions as identified across multiple studies?

Table 1. Challenges in LAC Implementation

Theme	Evidence	Implications
Lack of facilitator	Facilitators often untrained in leading	Quality of discussion is compromised, leading
preparation	reflective sessions (Aquino et al., 2023).	to superficial sharing of practices.
Scheduling and	Sessions interrupted by teaching loads and	Teachers struggle to consistently participate,
workload conflicts	administrative tasks (Lao & Lao, 2024).	reducing continuity of learning.
Resource limitations	Rural schools reported lack of ICT and updated	Implementation gaps widen between urban

Theme	Evidence	Implications
	materials (Vega, 2020).	and rural contexts.
Weak monitoring and	School heads often lacked tools to evaluate	Lack of accountability undermines
support	LAC effectiveness (Bartolay et al., 2024).	sustainability of the program.

As shown in Table 1, the most pressing challenge in LAC implementation is the limited capacity of facilitators, which affects the depth of teacher reflection during sessions. This aligns with global studies on professional learning communities, which highlight the importance of strong facilitation for sustainability (Hairon, 2022). Additionally, scheduling and workload pressures demonstrate how systemic constraints hinder participation, echoing findings that teacher professional development often competes with instructional responsibilities (Riveros et al., 2021). These findings emphasize the need for leadership and institutional policies that allocate adequate time and resources for effective LAC conduct.

Research Question 2

What are the consistent opportunities reported in the implementation of LAC sessions?

Table 2. Opportunities Provided by LAC

		Implications
Teacher collaboration	Sessions promoted knowledge-sharing and peer mentoring (Gonzales & Relos, 2022).	Strengthens collegiality and reduces professional isolation.
·	Accessible to teachers even in resource-poor contexts (Vega, 2020).	Provides equitable opportunities for growth.
Reflective practice	Teachers became more reflective about their teaching strategies (Bartolay et al., 2024).	Encourages contextualized improvement of pedagogy.
Professional confidence	·	Promotes innovation and willingness to adopt new approaches.

Table 2 indicates that LAC sessions created valuable opportunities for teacher collaboration and reflective practice, which align with constructivist principles of co-constructing knowledge (Stoll, 2020). These opportunities demonstrate the strengths of school-based professional development models in providing accessible, low-cost, and contextually grounded learning for teachers, particularly in schools with limited access to external training. Importantly, the literature shows that increased teacher confidence fosters a stronger sense of professional identity, which is a critical factor for long-term retention and performance improvement.

Research Question 3

To what extent does LAC session implementation improve teaching efficiency according to aggregated study data?

Table 3. Impacts on Teaching Efficiency

Theme	Evidence	Implications
Application of	Teachers applied differentiated instruction	Leads to better responsiveness to
strategies	learned in sessions (Bartolay et al., 2024).	diverse learner needs.
Use of digital tools	Teachers shared classroom ICT tools during LAC	Enhances technology integration in
	(Gonzales & Relos, 2022).	teaching.
Improved classroom	LAC discussions helped teachers adapt behavior	Fosters more positive learning
management	management strategies (Aquino et al., 2023).	environments.
Instructional	Teachers became more flexible in lesson delivery	Builds capacity to address curriculum

Theme	Evidence	Implications
adaptability	(Vega, 2020).	challenges and learner diversity.

Findings in Table 3 show that LAC improved teaching efficiency by equipping teachers with practical strategies that were immediately applicable in their classrooms. Although most studies measured teacher perceptions rather than direct student outcomes, these results correspond to Guskey's (2000) fourth level of professional development evaluation, which highlights the importance of applying new knowledge and skills in practice. The ability of teachers to integrate ICT and adopt flexible strategies illustrates how LAC serves as a bridge between policy reforms and classroom realities, thereby enhancing instructional effectiveness.

Research Question 4

How do variables such as LAC topic selection, facilitator training, and school context influence the effectiveness of LAC sessions?

Variable	Evidence	Implications
	Misalignment of session topics with teacher needs reduced engagement (Aquino et al., 2023).	Highlights importance of tailoring sessions to local instructional challenges.
	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	Suggests need for leadership investment in facilitator development.
IXCHOOL CONTOXT	Rural schools reported greater resource challenges than urban ones (Lao & Lao, 2024).	Equity gaps must be addressed for consistent LAC quality across regions.
•	Schools with active principals sustained LAC better (Vega, 2020).	Confirms that strong leadership is essential for embedding LAC into school culture.

As shown in Table 4, the effectiveness of LAC is strongly influenced by contextual and institutional factors. The alignment of topics with teachers' real needs emerged as a decisive factor in ensuring meaningful engagement. Moreover, the skill of the facilitator shaped whether discussions became reflective and transformative or remained procedural. Consistent with international studies on professional learning communities (Antinluoma et al., 2021; Hairon, 2022), leadership support and school context were found to be key determinants of sustainability. These findings highlight that while LAC is a promising model, its effectiveness depends on systemic investments in training, monitoring, and equity-focused policy implementation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This systematic review of 21 empirical studies on the Learning Action Cell (LAC) in Philippine basic education highlighted both the persistent challenges and the enabling opportunities of this school-based professional development strategy. The synthesis revealed that while LAC has been institutionalized as a mechanism to enhance teacher collaboration and reflective practice, its implementation remains uneven across schools. Major challenges include the lack of trained facilitators, time and workload constraints, resource limitations in rural contexts, and weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. At the same time, the review underscored that LAC provides accessible, low-cost opportunities for teachers to collaborate, build professional confidence, and contextualize pedagogical strategies. Evidence further suggests that participation in LAC has contributed to improvements in teaching efficiency, particularly in the areas of differentiated instruction, classroom management, and technology integration.

The review also showed that the effectiveness of LAC is strongly influenced by contextual and institutional variables such as topic relevance, facilitator competence, leadership support, and school resources. In line with Guskey's model of professional development, these factors collectively determine whether teacher learning is sustained and whether it ultimately translates into improved student outcomes. Taken together, the findings affirm that LAC is a promising professional development framework but one that requires systematic institutional support to realize its full potential.

Recommendations

In light of the conclusions, several recommendations are proposed. First, the Department of Education and school administrators should strengthen facilitator preparation through structured training programs that equip LAC leaders with skills in reflective dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and session management. This would ensure that sessions move beyond procedural discussions to become genuinely transformative learning spaces. Second, policies should provide protected time for LAC sessions within the school calendar, thereby reducing conflicts with teaching loads and administrative tasks. Allocating official time signals institutional commitment and enhances participation.

Third, there is a need to address resource disparities across schools. Providing updated instructional materials, ICT resources, and access to digital platforms would ensure that both urban and rural teachers can equally benefit from LAC. Fourth, the alignment of session topics with teachers' actual instructional needs must be prioritized. Mechanisms such as needs assessments and teacher feedback surveys can be institutionalized to ensure that topics are responsive and relevant. Fifth, leadership support and monitoring systems should be strengthened. Principals and school heads should actively model participation, ensure accountability, and integrate LAC outcomes into broader school improvement plans.

Finally, future research is recommended to move beyond teacher perceptions and to examine the direct impact of LAC on student outcomes. Longitudinal studies that track how teacher participation in LAC translates into measurable improvements in student achievement would provide stronger evidence of its effectiveness. By addressing these recommendations, LAC can evolve into a more sustainable and impactful professional development framework that contributes meaningfully to the quality of Philippine education.

5. Implications of the Study

The findings of this systematic review have several implications for policy in Philippine education. Since the Department of Education institutionalized the Learning Action Cell (LAC) as a core mechanism for teacher professional development, the review underscores the need for stronger policy enforcement and monitoring. Current challenges such as inconsistent facilitation, inadequate resources, and limited accountability highlight gaps between policy design and actual implementation. By strengthening guidelines for facilitator training, allocating protected time for LAC sessions, and ensuring equity of resources across rural and urban schools, policymakers can enhance the effectiveness of LAC as a nationwide professional development strategy.

For practice, the review highlights the crucial role of school leadership in sustaining LAC. Principals and school heads must not only allocate time and resources but also actively model participation and integrate LAC outputs into school improvement plans. Teachers, on the other hand, should be empowered to co-design session topics, ensuring alignment with classroom realities and instructional needs. Building collaborative cultures where teachers engage in reflective dialogue and shared problem-solving is essential for maximizing the benefits of LAC. These practices can cultivate stronger professional communities, reduce isolation, and improve instructional quality.

The study also carries important implications for future research. While the review synthesized evidence from 21 studies, most focused on teacher perceptions rather than measurable student outcomes. This points to the need

for longitudinal and mixed-methods studies that directly connect teacher participation in LAC with student performance indicators such as achievement scores, classroom engagement, and retention rates. Additionally, comparative studies between schools with strong and weak LAC implementation would provide valuable insights into contextual factors that influence effectiveness. Research on digital or blended LAC models could also expand opportunities for professional development, particularly in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Overall, the implications of this study emphasize that LAC is not only a policy mandate but also a vehicle for transforming professional development in Philippine basic education. For it to realize its full potential, LAC must be institutionalized with consistent policy support, strengthened leadership, and evidence-based practices that link teacher collaboration with student success.

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