The Lived Experiences of School Heads and Teachers in the Implementation of the School Learning Action Cell: A Case of Esperanza District

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Abstract

Aim: This study explored the implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) across eight public schools in Esperanza District, Agusan del Sur, covering seven academic years (2017–2018 to 2023–2024). It aimed to describe how SLAC supported teachers' professional learning, identify recurring challenges, and develop an action plan to enhance its sustainability.

Methodology: A descriptive-evaluative design employing qualitative methods was used. The researcher analyzed school documents—including plans, accomplishment reports, and evaluation forms—and conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen key informants (eight school heads and eight LAC coordinators) selected through purposive sampling. Data were treated using frequency counts and thematic analysis.

Findings: The study revealed that all participating schools complied with DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, by maintaining SLAC plans. The frequency of sessions varied annually (11 to 19 sessions per school). Respondents reported improvements in pedagogical practices, collaborative learning, and reflective teaching. Common challenges involved scheduling conflicts, insufficient resources, weak monitoring, and inconsistent leadership support. Schools responded with strategies such as flexible scheduling, improved communication, systematic follow-up, and resource reallocation.

Conclusion: The study recommends strengthening monitoring systems, enhancing communication channels, and aligning SLAC outputs with school improvement plans. These initiatives are expected to reinforce professional learning communities and promote a sustainable culture of collaboration and instructional improvement.

Keywords: *School Learning Action Cell (SLAC); professional development; collaboration; lived experiences; DepEd Order No. 35*

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving global education landscape, collaborative professional development has emerged as a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning improvement. Education systems worldwide increasingly emphasize lifelong learning and collective growth models that foster reflective practice and shared accountability. The School Learning Action Cell (SLAC), deeply rooted in collaborative inquiry and reflective practice, exemplifies this model and has been recognized for its potential to enhance instructional quality and learner outcomes (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Harris, 2018). By providing a structured avenue for educators to engage in dialogue, problem-solving, and action research, SLAC serves as both a professional learning community and a mechanism for continuous school improvement.

While the concept of SLAC aligns with global frameworks such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), its success depends on contextual adaptation. The Philippine education system—marked by diversity in learner needs, socio-cultural contexts, and geographic settings—requires localized approaches to global pedagogical models. As emphasized by Torres (2019) and Santos et al. (2020), professional development in the Philippines must be responsive to teachers' unique challenges, particularly in resource-constrained or rural settings. Pascua (2019) described SLAC as an integral component of the K to 12 Basic Education Program, promoting teacher collaboration in addressing instructional gaps. Similarly, Garet (2016) and Catimon (2017) underscored that professional learning becomes most

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effective when it is directly linked to teachers' daily experiences and classroom realities. More recent studies highlight that adaptive, school-based learning structures enhance teacher engagement and foster sustained instructional improvement (Garcia & Ramos, 2022; Li, 2023).

At the policy level, Republic Act No. 9155, or the *Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001*, mandates school heads to function as both instructional leaders and administrative managers. This dual role places them at the center of SLAC implementation, ensuring that collaborative learning translates into improved pedagogical practice. However, despite these mandates, international assessments reveal persistent educational gaps. The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results showed that Filipino students performed below the OECD average, highlighting the need for stronger instructional supervision and teacher support systems aligned with the Department of Education's MATATAG Agenda (DepEd, 2023).

Anchored on the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) under DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020, the institutionalization of SLACs reinforces the importance of sustained, school-based professional development. These collaborative sessions aim to enhance teachers' competence in curriculum implementation, pedagogy, and assessment, while fostering a culture of reflective practice and peer mentoring. As a cost-effective strategy, SLACs are funded primarily through the Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE), though schools and divisions are encouraged to mobilize additional resources for quality improvement and program sustainability.

In the Division of Agusan del Sur, the commitment to teacher development was reinforced through Division Memorandum No. 469, s. 2023, titled *"Tapping the Technical Assistance Providers: Re-skilling School Leaders in Giving Technical Assistance on Instructional Supervision."* This initiative underscores the Division's effort to strengthen the capacity of school heads as catalysts of teacher professional growth and instructional leadership. Within this broader framework, Esperanza District offers a compelling case for examining the implementation and sustainability of SLACs, given its geographically dispersed schools and diverse teaching contexts.

Despite strong policy support and existing literature affirming SLAC's value, there remains limited empirical evidence examining how SLACs are implemented, sustained, and experienced by school heads and teachers at the district level, particularly in rural contexts. This research gap is most evident in long-term analyses capturing the lived experiences of education leaders and practitioners who operationalize SLAC within contextual constraints.

This study, therefore, explored the lived experiences of school heads and teachers in implementing the SLAC in the Esperanza District. Specifically, it assessed the extent of implementation, identified challenges and enabling factors, and proposed strategies to sustain effective collaborative learning. By generating localized, evidence-based insights, this research bridges global frameworks and local realities, contributing to the broader discourse on teacher professional development and the strengthening of professional learning communities in Philippine schools.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

The Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Act of 2016 (Republic Act No. 10912) mandates the continuous enhancement of professionals' competencies to ensure their contribution to national development (PRC Resolution No. 1032). In education, Republic Act No. 10533 or the *Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013*, reinforced by DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, institutionalized the SLAC as the school-based continuing professional development mechanism under the K to 12 curriculum. This policy envisions collaborative learning sessions where teachers engage in reflective inquiry and problem-solving to address classroom challenges.

Teachers' professional growth necessitates continuous learning to adapt to dynamic educational demands (Silva, 2021). While in-service training is a professional duty, its implementation often remains inconsistent due to limited time and resources. Historical initiatives such as PRODED, TEEP, and SEDIP demonstrated that consistent participation in professional learning activities positively influences instructional quality and student outcomes (UNESCO, 2006). More recent studies confirm that continuous professional learning enhances teachers' adaptability and digital pedagogy in post-pandemic education (Reyes & Mercado, 2022; Tan, 2023).

Leadership theories identify technical, human, conceptual, and decision-making skills as essential for effective school management (Certo, 2014; Turan et al., 2009). Principals and LAC facilitators are expected to embody these competencies in guiding teachers toward school improvement. Tomal and Delsa (2013) described principals as change agents who exercise reflective and visionary leadership, while Ortigas (2015) stressed that consistent leadership behavior fosters teacher motivation and engagement. Contemporary studies affirm that transformational and participatory leadership enhances collaboration and commitment in professional learning communities (Domingo & Velasco, 2021; Nguyen, 2022).

Empirical research further validates the positive impact of structured professional development. Garet (2016) emphasized that when professional learning aligns with teachers' instructional realities, it significantly strengthens

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classroom practices. Likewise, Cohen, Hill, and Garin (2017) found that curriculum-focused training enhances teacher efficacy and learner performance. Vega (2020) linked the SLAC model to Japan's "lesson study," acknowledging its benefits in pedagogical innovation but identifying persistent challenges in funding and evaluation. Recent Philippine research reinforces these findings, highlighting SLAC's contribution to reflective dialogue, peer mentoring, and collaborative teaching (Lorenzo & Bautista, 2023; Dizon, Orge, & De Guzman, 2019; Gumban & Pelones, 2021).

The Learning Action Cell Toolkit (DepEd and Australian Aid, 2018) provided structured guidance for planning, facilitation, and evaluation, strengthening the institutionalization of SLACs nationwide. Collectively, these studies affirm SLAC as a vital instrument in advancing teacher competence, professional collaboration, and sustained school improvement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Collaboration Theory (Colbry & Hurwitz, 2014), which posits that collective problem-solving enhances professional efficacy and shared accountability. In educational contexts, collaboration fosters shared ownership of learning outcomes and continuous improvement through reflective dialogue. The study also draws from the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Huffman et al., 2016), which emphasize shared practices, continuous reflection, and data-driven decision-making. Together, these frameworks explain how structured collaboration within SLAC sessions builds collective efficacy, strengthens professional competence, and improves instructional outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study adapts the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model to the Philippine context through DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, which institutionalized the Learning Action Cell (LAC) as the primary mechanism for school-based continuing professional development. The framework posits that collaborative professional development—through sharing of best practices, coaching, mentoring, and joint problem-solving—enhances teacher competence and instructional quality, ultimately leading to improved learner outcomes. Effective LAC implementation, guided by strong school leadership and alignment with PLC principles, bridges instructional gaps and fosters a culture of sustained professional growth among teachers.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study
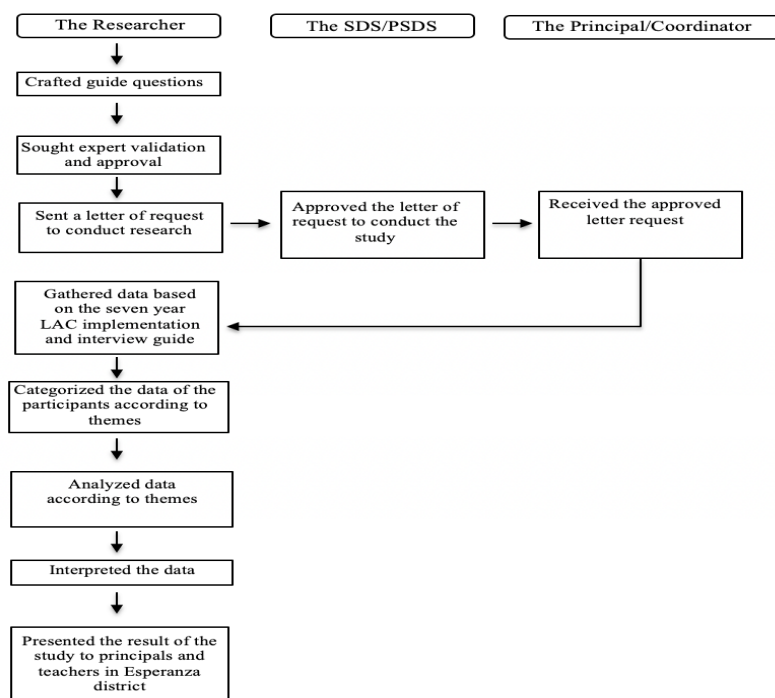
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Statement of the Problem

In pursuit of improving teaching and learning quality, the Department of Education institutionalized the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) as a school-based continuing professional development strategy under DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016. Despite its long-standing implementation, many rural districts continue to experience varied outcomes in sustaining effective SLAC practices due to contextual limitations, inconsistent monitoring, and limited documentation of results. In the Esperanza District, where schools are geographically dispersed and operate under resource constraints, little empirical evidence exists on how SLACs have been implemented, supported, and sustained over time.

This gap in localized and longitudinal analysis highlights the need to examine how schools have organized, facilitated, and benefited from SLAC sessions throughout the past seven (7) years. Understanding the patterns, challenges, and outcomes of SLAC implementation in this district is crucial to strengthening professional collaboration and improving instructional quality in similar contexts.

Hence, this study investigated the implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) in the Esperanza District to determine its profile, opportunities, and challenges, as well as the strategies employed by implementers to sustain its effectiveness. The findings of this study served as the basis for developing an action plan to enhance and sustain future SLAC implementation within the district.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to determine the implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) in the Esperanza District over the past seven (7) years. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Assess the extent of SLAC implementation based on school records in terms of planning, frequency of sessions, participation, mode of delivery, budget utilization, topics discussed, and evaluation results;
2. Identify the opportunities, gains, and challenges experienced by teachers and school heads in implementing the SLAC as a professional development mechanism; and
3. Develop an action plan to enhance and sustain the effective implementation of the SLAC in the Esperanza District.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What opportunities and gains do teachers experience through the Learning Action Cell (LAC) program for enhancing pedagogical practices and professional development?
2. What are the challenges encountered in the implementation of the LAC over the past seven years?
3. What strategies were used by the implementers to cope with the problems encountered during the implementation of the SLAC?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what action plan may be proposed to improve the implementation of the School Learning Action Cell in the Esperanza District?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive–evaluative qualitative research design to examine the implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) in the Esperanza District over the past seven (7) academic years. The descriptive component documented how SLACs were organized and implemented in terms of planning, frequency of sessions, participation, mode of delivery, budget utilization, topics discussed, and evaluation results. The evaluative component analyzed the perceived gains, challenges, and coping strategies of the implementers.

The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it explored the lived experiences and perspectives of school heads and Learning Action Cell (LAC) coordinators—data that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative means. As noted by Creswell (2014), qualitative designs are suitable for understanding complex educational processes within real-world contexts. This design was particularly suited to the study as it enabled an in-depth and holistic understanding of how SLACs were operationalized across schools, thereby providing evidence-based insights for improving future implementation.

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Population, Sampling, and Other Sources of Data

The study was conducted in Esperanza District, a municipality in Agusan del Sur, CARAGA Region, comprising 63 schools—14 secondary and 49 elementary—under the administrative supervision of the Schools Division Office of Agusan del Sur.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify participants who possessed substantial experience and direct involvement in SLAC implementation. A total of sixteen (16) participants were selected, composed of eight (8) school heads and eight (8) LAC coordinators, representing both elementary and secondary schools. Each participating school designated one school head and one LAC coordinator to ensure balanced representation of both administrative and instructional perspectives. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for this qualitative study, where depth of understanding and relevance of participant experience were prioritized over numerical representation.

The participating schools included Dacutan Central Elementary School, Esperanza Central Elementary School, Guadalupe Central Elementary School, Esperanza National High School, Guadalupe National High School, Hawilian National High School, Salug National High School, and San Toribio National High School. This composition ensured that data were drawn from diverse educational contexts within the district, including both central and geographically remote schools.

In addition to interviews, secondary data were utilized, including SLAC plans, meeting minutes, accomplishment reports, and evaluation results covering School Years 2017–2023. These documents provided historical and documentary evidence that complemented interview findings, allowing data triangulation to enhance validity and reliability.

Instruments

The primary research instrument was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide, developed in accordance with the provisions of DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, which serves as the national policy framework for SLAC implementation. The guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on SLAC practices.

To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by a panel of three validators composed of education supervisors and research consultants with expertise in professional learning communities and qualitative research. Their comments and suggestions were incorporated to refine question phrasing, ensure logical sequencing, and enhance alignment with the research objectives. The instrument was pilot-tested in a neighboring district to assess clarity, comprehensibility, and consistency before its official administration.

Complementary to the interviews, a document review checklist aligned with the thematic categories of the interview guide was developed to collect data from SLAC records and reports. Both tools ensured coherence between data sources and consistency in the evaluation process.

Data Collection

Prior to data gathering, formal approval was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent and the District-in-Charge of Esperanza, in compliance with the Department of Education's research protocols. Upon approval, coordination with the district focal person facilitated the identification and scheduling of participants. Each participant signed an informed consent form before data collection commenced.

Data were collected between November 2023 and January 2024 in two phases:

1. Document Review Phase – SLAC-related documents such as plans, meeting minutes, and accomplishment reports were collected from participating schools and examined to provide a factual baseline for the implementation patterns across the district.
2. Interview Phase – Semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site at each participant's school in a quiet and private setting during available schedules. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy of transcription.

Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were produced immediately after each session. All data were organized and classified according to the research questions for systematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis primarily employed qualitative thematic analysis, complemented by descriptive statistics for the quantitative components of the study.

Descriptive statistics, specifically frequency and percentage, were used to summarize SLAC implementation data derived from school records and reports, including session frequency, participation rates, and budget utilization.

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Thematic analysis followed the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved:
1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts;
2. Generating initial codes based on recurring ideas and patterns;
3. Clustering codes into broader themes;
4. Reviewing and refining emerging themes for coherence;
5. Defining and naming the final themes; and
6. Synthesizing the themes to address the study's objectives and research questions.

Manual coding was utilized to maintain close researcher immersion in the data. Triangulation between interview results and documentary evidence further enhanced analytical validity and credibility. The integrated analysis provided both quantitative descriptions and qualitative insights to holistically capture the implementation and sustainability of the SLAC program.

Ethical Considerations

This study complied with the Department of Education Research Ethics Guidelines under DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2017 and the institutional research ethics policies of the Schools Division of Agusan del Sur. Ethical clearance was granted by the Division Research Committee prior to data collection.

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed; no identifying information appeared in transcripts, analyses, or reports. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Respectful, non-discriminatory, and culturally sensitive communication was maintained throughout the research process.

The study strictly adhered to the fundamental ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice at all stages of inquiry.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC)

The implementation of the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) across eight public schools in the Esperanza District from 2017–2018 to 2023–2024 demonstrated consistent compliance with DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, affirming the institutional commitment to continuous professional development. All schools maintained annual SLAC plans as mandated, indicating a strong adherence to school-based learning systems. However, session frequency varied across schools and academic years. For instance, Esperanza National High School and Guadalupe National High School conducted sessions regularly, while others implemented fewer sessions due to contextual constraints such as scheduling conflicts and limited resources.

This variation reflects a context-responsive adaptation among schools, consistent with Garcia (2022) and UNESCO (2021), who found that professional learning communities often modify their implementation patterns to accommodate local realities and resource limitations. Such flexibility demonstrates that while the SLAC model provides a national framework, its success relies heavily on localized management and responsiveness to institutional capacity.

Participation and Inclusivity

Participant engagement levels fluctuated throughout the seven-year period, with higher participation rates observed in Esperanza Central Elementary School and Guadalupe National High School. In most cases, participation extended beyond classroom teachers to include school heads, master teachers, and coordinators. This inclusivity signified a shared learning culture encompassing both instructional and administrative leadership.

Such collaborative participation aligns with Vega (2020) and the DepEd–British Council (2022) professional learning framework, which emphasize distributed leadership and shared accountability as central elements of sustainable teacher professional development. These findings affirm that SLAC's collaborative design strengthens collegial relationships and fosters reflective practice across hierarchical roles.

Adaptations During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools displayed flexibility by transitioning from face-to-face sessions to asynchronous and synchronous modalities. Despite the restrictions, SLAC activities continued through online platforms,

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ensuring continuity of professional learning. This adaptability echoes UNESCO (2021), which emphasized the necessity of hybrid and digital modalities in sustaining teacher development during global disruptions.

The district's capacity to adjust demonstrates institutional resilience and supports the notion that SLACs, as structured yet flexible mechanisms, can withstand contextual challenges while maintaining teacher engagement and learning continuity.

Funding and Thematic Focus

Funding for SLAC activities was primarily drawn from the Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE), supplemented by Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) support, school canteen income, and personal contributions. This reflects an institutional prioritization of teacher development despite fiscal constraints.

The topics covered from 2017 to 2024 included learner diversity, content and pedagogy, assessment, ICT integration, and 21st-century skills, which align with the Department of Education's thrust toward inclusive and quality education. These themes correspond with Smith (2020), who emphasized that coherent and sustained professional learning content enhances instructional improvement and student performance.

Table 1. Summary of Seven-Year SLAC Evaluation Results
Results of evaluation of the last 7 years

Name of School	LAC Effective-ness	Professional Learning & Teacher Quality	Critical Reflection Classroom Practice	Pedagogical Changes & Student Outcomes
Dacutan Central ES	95%	97%	88%	85%
Esperanza Central ES	94%	93%	89%	84%
Guadalupe Central ES	98%	98%	91%	88%
Esperanza NHS	93%	97%	88%	85%
Guadalupe NHS	95%	94%	95%	94%
Hawilian NHS	92%	96%	85%	82%
Salug NHS	98%	96%	89%	85%
San Toribio NHS	97%	95%	82%	86%

The number of data entries shown in the table is based on the actual hardcopy of the accomplishment report as presented by the authorized person (Sources: T1, T2, T3, SH1, T4, T5, T6, and SH2). Certification was issued see Appendices pages 83-90.

Evaluation Results and Interpretation

The findings presented in Table 1 show consistently high SLAC effectiveness ratings, ranging from 92% to 98% across schools. Professional learning and teacher quality were rated between 93% and 98%, while pedagogical and student outcome indicators ranged from 82% to 94%. Schools with strong administrative and instructional leadership—particularly Guadalupe Central Elementary School and Guadalupe National High School—achieved the highest overall performance ratings.

These results affirm that structured, reflective collaboration contributes significantly to teacher effectiveness, as supported by Bajar et al. (2021) and Culajara (2023), who identified SLAC as a cost-effective and sustainable framework for teacher professional growth in the Philippine context.

Opportunities and Gains

Teachers and school heads cited enhanced instructional strategies, stronger collegial collaboration, and heightened motivation for professional learning as primary benefits of SLAC participation. These experiences fostered reflective teaching and collective accountability. Brown et al. (2019) similarly found that professional learning communities strengthen innovation and teacher empowerment through shared reflection and dialogue.

Participants further emphasized that SLACs contributed to curriculum alignment and pedagogical coherence, supporting the Department of Education's goal of improving classroom quality through collaborative knowledge-building.

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Challenges in Implementation

Key challenges identified included scheduling conflicts, inconsistent attendance, limited resources, and weak monitoring systems. These constraints mirror those reported by Vega (2020), who noted that high teacher workloads and inadequate administrative support often hinder the sustainability of collaborative learning structures. Despite these limitations, most schools exhibited persistence and creativity in maintaining their SLACs, demonstrating strong professional commitment.

Coping Strategies and Good Practices

Implementers addressed challenges through flexible scheduling, proactive communication, and online collaboration. Consistent leadership monitoring and recognition of teacher participation further strengthened program sustainability. These practices align with Johnson (2021), who emphasized that effective professional learning communities thrive when supported by participatory leadership and structured feedback mechanisms.

Proposed Action Plan

Based on the study's findings, the following action plan was developed to enhance SLAC implementation within the Esperanza District:
1. Establish a clear communication and monitoring framework for SLAC activities.
2. Develop a unified scheduling system to ensure regular sessions and avoid overlaps with academic duties.
3. Institutionalize post-LAC follow-up and documentation procedures for progress tracking.
4. Conduct periodic needs assessments to guide resource allocation and content focus.

These measures may further strengthen SLAC's sustainability and effectiveness as a professional development mechanism supporting DepEd's MATATAG Agenda and the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST).

Conclusions

The study concludes that the School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) has been effectively implemented across eight schools in the Esperanza District over a seven-year period (2017–2024), reflecting a sustained institutional commitment to professional growth in alignment with DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016.

All schools maintained structured SLAC plans integrated into their school systems, signifying the institutionalization of collaborative professional learning. Variations in implementation frequency were attributed to contextual adaptability rather than non-compliance. The active participation of teachers, master teachers, and school heads reinforced collegiality and reflective teaching, while funding support demonstrated prioritization of professional growth.

The thematic coherence of topics—spanning pedagogy, assessment, and ICT integration—aligned with the DepEd MATATAG Agenda and underscored SLAC's contribution to 21st-century instructional improvement. Overall, SLAC emerged as an effective mechanism for promoting continuous professional learning, teacher empowerment, and evidence-informed instructional innovation.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed for consideration by educational leaders, teachers, and policymakers to strengthen SLAC implementation:

Operational Enhancements
1. The district may institutionalize a unified scheduling system to ensure regular SLAC sessions and minimize conflicts with teaching schedules.
2. The district may strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms by standardizing documentation tools, reporting templates, and feedback procedures.

Leadership and Capacity Building
3. School heads and facilitators may enhance their facilitation and supervisory competencies through targeted training on reflective supervision, technical assistance, and learning session management.

Resource and Collaboration
4. Schools may optimize MOOE utilization and explore partnerships with local stakeholders for training and material support.

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5. The district may develop a communication and knowledge-sharing platform to disseminate best practices and sustain inter-school collaboration.

These recommendations, if adopted, may reinforce SLAC's role as a catalyst for teacher professionalization, collaborative innovation, and continuous instructional improvement within the Esperanza District and comparable educational settings.

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