

Teacher Learning Communities

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It is evident that as teachers identify and solve problems of practice together, TLCs (Teacher Learning Communities) build the capacity and collective will to enhance the learning and achievement of all students.

teacher learning community

leadership

democracy

1. The Connection between TLCs and Teaching Effectiveness

The Teaching Council in Ireland, which is the statutory professional body for pre-service and in-service teachers, acknowledges that improving the quality of student learning is a principal driver of teacher learning and teachers' engagement with professional collaboration [1].

Owen [2] (p. 217) contends that TLCs are effective because teachers have the opportunity to collaborate regularly over an extended timeframe, which in turn can allow for experimentation, as well as providing support to each other in skill-building and in the use of new pedagogies. Key features of such communities include the establishment and maintenance of communication norms and trust, as well as the collaborative interactions which take place when groups of teachers work together to examine and improve their practice [3]. Their cultivation within schools is made easier by having appropriate leadership [4]. It is acknowledged that when leadership is supportive of TLCs, an enhanced degree of collaboration among teachers for exchange and co-ordination of teaching and more sophisticated professional collaboration occurs [5].

As noted above, teaching effectiveness is being identified with the experience of teacher "pedagogical well-being" (TPWB). The understanding of the latter was extrapolated from research by Soini, Pyhältö and Pietarinen [6]. It perceives teaching effectiveness with teacher successfulness across four domains: Interactions with students; Interactions with colleagues; Making evaluations; and Choosing and developing instructional tools [7] (p. 147).

2. TLCs and Planning Classroom Activities

With the increasing prevalence of standardized teaching and learning processes, there is an increased propensity for teachers to engage in pedagogical processes and activities, including making evaluations on one's teaching and choosing and developing instructional tools, that are removed from the lifeworld of the students. This can negatively impact student learning and engagement [8].

It is evident from the literature that Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) can act as a bulwark to mitigate the impact of such tendencies on classroom teaching [2][9][10]. Owen [2] observes that at the core of TLCs which function at the most mature level is the notion of transforming the concept of teaching as a privatised practice. There is an emphasis on boundary removal and a shift towards working with colleagues. Teaching within this conceptual model emphasises genuine collaboration, joint problem-solving, debate, constructive observation and feedback and support for collegial learning as a joint enterprise.

According to Hardy and Ronnerman [9], extends teachers' practice-learning beyond the confines of their own classrooms, resulting in an extended and deepened understanding of practice. In their view, it also activates teachers' agency and latent critical capacities in a way that helps to build the professional understanding necessary for transforming practice. This activation of teachers' critical thinking faculties when working together highlights the potential of TLCs as incubators of ideas and approaches which promote student and teacher learning.

There is evidence to suggest that teachers' ability to work, plan and evaluate together is dependent on the degree to which school management and educational leaders view the teaching staff as a community of learners and the school as a learning environment for teachers as well as students [10]. This has significance for the focus of this research on school leadership and the effectiveness of TLCs. It will be considered in light of the data that emerges from the research site of practice as part of the findings section below.

3. TLCs and Interactions with Students

Drew, Priestley and Michael, M.K. [11] (p. 7) observe that the collaborative potential of TLCs open-up "new ways of working in school" with the potential of enhanced practice and outcomes for children. This in turn can have a positive impact on interactions with students, as it leads to learners who are more interested and excited and motivated to learn. In the process, the role of the teacher changes from that of being the archetypal expert disseminating information to that of being a coach, a co-learner and a learning facilitator [5]. In order to effect this change in role, Owen's [2] research on professional learning communities points to the importance of a teacher's capacity for skilful questioning and quality feedback.

The prevalence of teacher-student interactions in schools with the concomitant positive impact on students' learning can be influenced by the prevailing leadership style that is evident in the school. Xhomara [12] for example identified a symmetry between the presence of participative and transformational leadership styles and staff's willingness to participate in interactive styles of teaching. The significance of school leadership for students' classroom participation was also evident from Sebastian, Allenworth and Steven's [13] configurational study. It highlighted the importance of principal and teacher leadership and organizational supports over and above the prior achievement of the students.

4. TLCs and Teacher Collaboration

Soini et al. [6] recognise that teacher learning communities (TLCs) provide spaces where shared responsibility can be enacted for pupil learning and growth. Such spaces in their view offer the necessary emotional support for each participating teacher to optimize their effectiveness as classroom teachers (p. 737). Similarly, Owen [2] describes such communities as small groups of teachers who come together as a team to help each other to improve student learning. She suggests that they are effective because members work together regularly over an extended time frame, with teachers experimenting and supporting each other in skill-building and using new pedagogies [14].

The significance of leadership in schools for the cultivation of TLCs is acknowledged by Mulford [4]. Such cultivation in his view is a developmental process involving teachers working together in schools, sharing norms and values, and respecting diversity, as well as building capacity for change through evidence-based learning.

The critical role of school leadership in this process is also evidenced in the work of Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen and Grissom [15]. Leadership is pivotal for the propagation of the appropriate culture in the school, as well as for prioritizing matters relating to teaching and learning, such as the opportunities for teachers to come together in teacher learning communities. It can be a cause of stress and burden when such leadership is absent [6]. Indeed, the TALIS Report [5] (p. 205) evidence that when leadership is supportive of TLCs there is an increased propensity for an enhanced degree of collaboration among teachers.

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