



THE TEACHER LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAM:

RESEARCH REPORT FOR 2014-15

Executive Summary

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Background

Launched in 2007, the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) is a joint initiative through partnership between the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) and the Ontario Ministry of Education with shared goals to:

- support experienced teachers to undertake self-directed advanced professional development;
- develop teachers' leadership skills for sharing their professional learning and exemplary practices; and
- facilitate knowledge exchange for spread and sustainability of effective and innovative practices.

Following completion of our initial research study of the TLLP (Campbell, Lieberman & Yashkina, 2013), we were invited to submit a proposal for a longitudinal study, beginning in 2013-14. We provided a report of findings and work in progress during 2013-14 (Campbell et al., 2014).

This Research Report provides a progress update on work conducted and in progress during the 2014-15 year of research.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The research questions for the current study are:

1. What is the impact of TLLP projects for teachers' professional learning, knowledge, skills, practices, and leadership experiences?
2. How is learning being shared beyond the TLLP project team?
3. What longer-term impact from participating in TLLP projects can be identified?

The methods being used in the longitudinal research study are:

1. Continue analysis of TLLP cohort data for approved projects and for Final Reports
2. Observe TLLP Leadership Skills for Classroom Teachers and Sharing the Learning Summit
3. Survey of all TLLP Projects' Teacher Leaders

4. Mini Pre/Post Surveys of TLLP Participants
5. Provincial Knowledge Exchange (PKE): Monitoring Sharing of Knowledge and Practices Through a PKE Log
6. Support Teacher Leaders to Write Vignettes
7. Case Studies: PKE Projects
8. NING and Social Networking Analysis
9. Focus Groups with Ministry and OTF Provincial TLLP Leaders
10. Reviews of relevant research literatures

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RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR 2014-15

Highlights and conclusions from the 2014-15 research are summarized below.

3.1 WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF TLLP PROJECTS FOR TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, PRACTICES AND LEADERSHIP?

Participants in the TLLP are highly enthusiastic about the benefits of these projects. In 2014-15, 97% of participants in the Leadership Skills for Classroom Teachers training rated being very satisfied or satisfied with the experience. At the end of their TLLP project, 98% of participants reported being very satisfied or satisfied with the Sharing the Learning Experience. These are excellent results.

As part of our longitudinal research, in 2014-15, we surveyed current and previous TLLP project leaders over all cohorts. All (100%) survey respondents indicated TLLP-related professional learning benefits. Specifically:

- 78% of respondents reported new knowledge and/or improved understanding
- 75% of respondents reported improved instructional practice
- 73% of respondents reported improved communication/collaboration between teachers
- 58% of respondents reported improved energy/inspiration
- 54% of respondents reported improved self-efficacy
- 50% of respondents reported improved technological skills
- 48% of respondents reported improved assessment skills.

With regard to teacher leadership, 97% of survey respondents indicated that the TLLP had supported development of their leadership skills. Specific leadership skills that improved were:

- Facilitation/presentation skills for 74% of respondents
- Project management skills for 70% of respondents
- Communication/listening skills for 54% of respondents
- Interpersonal skills/relationship building for 53% of respondents
- Trouble shooting/problem solving skills for 47% of respondents

Ten TLLP teacher leaders wrote vignettes during our 2014-15 research. These vignette writers spoke of their experiences of: stepping into leadership and working with peers as partners; growing leadership in their TLLP team; learning leadership while implementing new ideas; developing collaboration, courage and support as a leader; and identifying and overcoming personal and interpersonal leadership challenges.

Provincial TLLP partners in OTF and the Ministry spoke of the positive impact of teacher-led professional learning through the TLLP with benefits for participating teachers' confidence, knowledge, skills, and practices, and their leadership to share, support, and spread professional learning and practices with other teachers. A combination of de-privatizing practices and professional collaboration (in person and online) is very powerful for teachers' professional learning and leadership development.

While TLLP focuses primarily on teachers' learning, the improvements in knowledge, skills and practices are intended to also benefit students. According to the majority of our survey respondents, their TLLP professional learning and practices had benefited students' engagement, improved students' learning experiences, increased achievement, and/or improved students' motivation.

3.2 HOW IS LEARNING SHARED BEYOND THE TLLP TEAM?

An important goal of TLLP is knowledge exchange to share professional learning and practices more widely. The main audience for sharing TLLP knowledge is teachers. Additional audiences include school and district administrators, students, parents, and community members.

Consistent with our 2013-14 findings, the main methods of knowledge exchange involved in-person sharing/professional learning and/or online sharing of knowledge, practices and resources. Specifically, the following methods of sharing were reported by TLLP survey respondents:

- Use of workshops/professional development sessions (77% responses);
- Staff meetings (61% responses);
- Online media (51% responses);
- Teacher professional learning communities/groups (44% of responses);
- Conference presentations (43% of responses);
- Modeling/classroom visits (43% of responses);
- Mentoring (37% of responses).

In addition, communications and publications were used, including school newsletters, professional articles, and academic journals, to further spread information and awareness about the TLLPs. In terms of what TLLP members are sharing for professional learning and knowledge exchange, the vast majority (73%) of projects are (co)producing and sharing materials for use in classrooms. The combination of professional collaboration (in person and online) to develop and share practical resources appears to be critical.

With just over half of TLLP survey respondents utilizing online media, the most common online approach was via the Mentoring Moments NING. Very encouragingly, our analysis of NING data for 2014-15 indicates increased use of this online site. Comparing average monthly data for 2014-15 to 2013-14, we discover the following increases:

- Monthly visits increased from an average of 1679 in 2013-14 to 2412 in 2014-15
- Monthly unique visitors increased from an average of 1094 in 2013-14 to 1716 in 2014-15
- Monthly page visits increased from an average of 7376 in 2013-14 to 8249 in 2014-15

The number of blog posts more than doubled in 2014-15. By March 2015, there were 91 TLLP groups on the NING and 81 discussion threads occurred during 2014-15. These increases in online activity on the NING are impressive.

According to provincial interviewees, the knowledge exchange goal of TLLP has developed considerably during 2014-15. There has been “an explosion” of interest in TLLP projects and the identification of TLLP teacher leaders as sources of knowledge and expertise by partners across Ontario and beyond. Two new initiatives – Teach Ontario an online platform developed by TVOntario in partnership with TLLP teachers “For Ontario teachers, By Ontario teachers” and the Norway-Canada partnership involving former TLLP participants – have the potential to further the provincial, national and international sharing of teachers’ knowledge, skills, and practices.

3.3 WHAT LONGER-TERM IMPACT CAN BE IDENTIFIED FROM PARTICIPATING IN TLLP PROJECTS?

TLLP teacher leaders attend their initial training in May, are expected to implement their TLLP project during the following school year, and report on their final project at the Sharing the Learning Summit in November. Hence, TLLP participants are engaged in their projects for approximately 18-months in total. In this context, there have been some concerns about whether TLLP projects can have a longer-term impact.

Very encouragingly, 98% of our TLLP survey respondents reported that their TLLP activities had been sustained in some way. Reported aspects of sustainability included:

- Further implementation of TLLP learning/strategies/tools (82% responses);
- Further development of professional learning (80% responses);
- Continued or further collaboration with colleagues to develop and/or improve teaching practice (70% responses);
- Further sharing of professional learning/strategies/tools (66% responses).

These findings concerning sustainability or spread and/or implementation of TLLP-related activities after the initial funding are highly important.

SITUATING TLLP WITHIN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

An early action of the Working Table on Teacher Development (2007) was to conduct a literature review of effective approaches to teachers' professional learning. Five principles for professional learning were identified: coherent; attentive to adult learning styles; goal-oriented; sustainable; and evidence-informed. Eight years later, as part of our research on TLLP as not only a provincial leader but also as a potential world leader in approaches to teachers' professional learning, we decided to review the current literature on effective professional learning to discern its connection or otherwise with our evidence emerging about the TLLP experiences. Two key questions guided our review of the current research literature on teachers' professional learning:

- What are the 'big ideas'/recurring themes about teachers' professional learning and leadership development?
- What ideas and themes in the literature support and/or contradict the TLLP approach to teachers' professional learning?

In response to the first question – the 'big ideas'/recurring themes – a careful review of current research literature revealed 12 research-informed best practices for teachers' professional learning and leadership development. Three themes related to the content of teachers' professional learning, specifically the importance of:

- content focus and quality;
- teacher voice; and
- job-embedded learning.

Nine themes related to the structure of teachers' professional learning, specifically the importance of:

- collaboration and community of practice;
- sustained duration;
- coherence to professional needs and students' needs;
- active learning;
- professional support, coaching and mentoring;
- program evaluation;
- sustainability;
- professional reflection; and
- positive learning environment.

In response to the second question for our literature review – what ideas and themes in the literature support and/or contradict the TLLP approach – not surprisingly, but nonetheless encouragingly, there is high congruence between the five principles of effective professional learning identified by the Working Table on Teacher Development (2007) and integrated into the TLLP approach, and the 12 features of effective professional learning we identify from our review of recent relevant literature. What is perhaps even more encouraging is that our research indicates that TLLP does in fact embody all of these principles in its actual practice. Our review of the research literature, plus an inter-jurisdictional scan of teachers' professional learning in other contexts, combined with our research evidence lead us to conclude that TLLP embodies highly effective and evidence-informed principles and practices for teachers' professional learning and is a global leader in this work.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, we conclude that there are substantial benefits and positive impacts from participating in the TLLP for teachers' professional learning, knowledge, skills, practices and leadership development. These benefits can extend to other professionals and to students, parents and community members through improvements in educational practices and also sharing of new knowledge. The provincial TLLP partners – in the Ministry and OTF – are to be highly commended for their continuing commitment to the TLLP, now in its 9th Cohort of TLLP projects. Moving forward, continuing to value, honor and embed the original and integral principles of the TLLP through partnership and working to support professional learning for, with and by teachers will be key. This, combined also with the ongoing commitment to continuous improvement for the details of the TLLP in practice and to including new relevant professional learning approaches and opportunities as appropriate, will secure the ongoing success of the program.

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