



Teachers as Leaders of Professional Learning: Lessons from Ontario's Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP)

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This article discusses Ontario's Teachers Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP), which aims to support experienced teachers' professional learning, develop teachers' leadership skills, and facilitate knowledge exchange to share practices. The author's research identifies considerable benefits of professional learning led "by, with and for" experienced teachers involving collaborative learning and sharing of practices. Opportunities for teachers' learning and developing their leadership through the experience of being TLLP project leaders is challenging and rewarding. The benefits for teachers being recognized and encouraged as leaders of professional learning are considerable. To support knowledge exchange and spreading practices, the twin strategies of developing professional collaboration and of developing practical resources for use by teachers appear to be the most prevalent and impactful approaches. Lessons emerging for education systems and for teachers seeking to develop professional learning and leadership by, with and for teachers are outlined.

IF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS were supported to become leaders of learning – their own learning, the

professional learning of other teachers and partners, and their students' learning – what would these teacher leaders do and with what success and challenges? These questions have been central to our research[i] investigating the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) in Ontario, Canada.

The Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP)

In a partnership between the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF), the TLLP was launched in 2007 with 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 to help spread and sustain practices.

Each year, experienced teachers – individually or more commonly in teams – can apply to conduct a TLLP project. School board committees review applications and submit their priority choices to

a provincial committee, comprised of teacher union and government representatives, who select projects for funding. From 2007 to 2014, over 600 projects have been funded. The projects cover a wide range of topics. The most prevalent topics include: differentiated instruction, technology, literacy, professional learning community, student assessment, and mathematics.

Prior to embarking on their TLLP projects, teachers attend a Leadership Skills for Classroom Teachers training to prepare them to take on the professional learning, project management and leadership expectations of a TLLP. Throughout their TLLP project, participants become part of Mentoring Moments, an online community to share resources, learning and discussion. At the end of their TLLP project, TLLP teams attend the Sharing the Learning Summit to showcase completed projects and to advance further spread of practices.

Teachers' professional learning

In my research with colleagues Ann Lieberman and Anna Yashkina, we analyzed a sample of TLLP projects' Final Reports. The three most commonly reported "improvements" for TLLP teachers were in their

knowledge and skills (94 percent), instructional and assessment practices (76 percent), and leadership skills (55 percent). The fact that the TLLP is led and developed “by, with and for experienced teachers” was considered to be tremendously valuable. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to identify a project of interest to them and to lead the development of their own professional learning. As a provincial interviewee commented:

“I strongly encourage mid-career teachers to participate in a TLLP project. The opportunity to think deeply and intentionally about your teaching practice through self-directed learning as an experienced teacher is an excellent way to update your pedagogy to meet the needs of today’s learners while enriching your own passion for teaching.”

The experience of leading a project focused on teacher learning as well as student learning involves considerable professional development, as one TLLP teacher interviewee explained:

“... participating in TLLP, having to write the proposal, I think shifted my perception or my understanding... of what professional development is... the biggest shift that I would not have engaged in thinking about are issues related to teacher learning – other teachers’ learning.”

The majority (85 percent) of TLLP projects in recent cohorts have developed and utilized teacher collaborative professional learning activities. While opening up teachers’ individual practices to other colleagues could initially be perceived as risky, enabling teachers’ voices and increasing transparency of practices to inform collaborative

learning can become empowering. A TLLP teacher leader commented:

“I think it was very empowering for them [TLLP teacher team members] and I think that they started having more confidence... part of the TLLP was to teach people how to network and how to be transparent; how to add what they’re doing in a more public sense, instead of just hiding behind their classroom walls.”

Teacher leadership

Developing teacher leadership through TLLP involves recognizing and developing teachers’ expertise and supporting their capacity to initiate and spread improvements in practices locally and provincially.

Indeed, TLLP teachers spoke of being motivated, recognized and inspired as leaders. As one TLLP teacher leader commented:

“Professionally, I don’t have a leadership position within my school community. I’m not a chairperson; I’m not a vice principal; I’m a teacher. I felt that it was a way for me to become a specialist in a particular area in a short period of time... It was rewarding, enriching, inspiring, invigorating, captivating... [the TLLP team could] dream big thoughts that normally we would never have the time to do, nor be offered the opportunity.”

And in the words of another teacher, TLLP provided the opportunity for “grass roots leadership at its finest.”

Teachers explained that participating in TLLP developed their leadership skills through “learning by doing”:

“TLLP allowed me to develop professionally. I learned leadership skills like: team building,

developing trust, collaborating with others, presentation skills, co-teaching, debriefing, and reflecting. I learned and lived the experience of organizing collaboration.”

“I feel that I have gained valuable experience dealing with keeping my colleagues moving forward on a project with time and budget restraints, while maintaining a strong working relationship based on respect, trust, and acknowledgements of each other’s contributions.”

TLLP teacher leaders indicated that the experience of leading a project, of developing and sharing their expertise, of presenting within their school and community, of dealing with change processes, and of negotiating interpersonal dynamics involved in successfully developing and delivering a TLLP project could be challenging. However, the TLLP teachers mostly found a way to overcome challenges and in the process developed considerably in their professional confidence, knowledge and skills.

Sharing knowledge and spreading practices

A priority goal of TLLP is to support teachers to develop and share their professional learning. TLLP teachers shared their learning through school and district-wide professional development sessions, staff meetings, and learning communities. They also engaged in modeling their practices (by opening their classes for other teachers and administration, demonstrating lessons during workshop or school visits), and/or developing professional relationships to support interested teachers from their own or other schools (for example through mentoring).

Another major area of sharing learning involves a larger community, including nationally and internationally. Increasingly, the majority of TLLP teachers are using online media, for example posting information and resources on school/district and other educational organization websites, developing project-dedicated websites, engaging in discussions on online forums, tweeting, blogging, and creating project-related groups on social networks.

To support the sharing and spread of new and effective practices, the majority of TLLP projects involve the development of practical materials that can be used in classrooms or schools, such as sample lesson plans, assessment tasks, and teaching strategies. Overall the twin strategies of developing professional collaboration and of developing practical resources for use by other teachers appear to be the most prevalent and impactful approaches to sharing learning through TLLPs.

Lessons learned from TLLP

Teacher-led professional learning is critical for supporting teachers to innovate, own, share and spread their professional knowledge and practices. Such learning is a powerful addition to – rather than a full replacement of – approaches to provincial, district and school professional development. The following lessons emerge from TLLP.

For national, provincial or district systems seeking to develop teachers' leadership:

- Cultivate respectful partnerships with teachers and teacher unions to support professional learning.
- Provide enabling conditions

including: funding for professional learning and teacher leadership activities; training to develop teacher-led professional learning and leadership; and infrastructure and support to facilitate developing capacity, professional dialogue and sharing of resources (such as online and in person networks); and research to monitor and inform existing and future practices.

- Resist being overly directive about a “teacher leadership program”; rather a culture of developing professional responsibility for inquiry and innovation to enable teachers’ learning and leadership to flourish is critical.

For teachers seeking to develop their leadership to support other teachers’ professional learning and practices:

- Identify a priority area of professional practice that you are passionate about improving.
- Consider how you are going to learn to improve your own practice and how you are going to collaborate with others to co-learn and share professional learning.
- Be intentional about how you will develop your leadership practices to engage other teachers in collaborative professional learning and sharing of practices.
- Contribute to collaborative professional learning activities and seek to connect with and expand your networks (in person and online).
- Utilize practical resources to support sharing, spread and implementation of new practices.

While the above lists may appear challenging, TLLP has demonstrated

that the learning involved in addressing these challenges can be rewarding for individual teachers’ professional learning and leadership and for collaborative learning by, with and for teachers. Moreover, sharing the resulting new practices can contribute to wider school and system improvements beyond that feasible through traditional professional development or policy directives alone.

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