

Teachers learning together

Education

National

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Teacher-driven continuing professional development (CPD) designs empower teachers because they are centered not only on what they know, but also on what they want to share and learn with colleagues. Such designs challenge our traditional culture of teacher learning.

Teacher learning is driven by collaboration, not compliance, and rooted in shared solutions to developing knowledge about teaching and learning. We see ‘teachers supporting teachers’ and ‘teachers learning together’ as offering robust models for CPD. Such CPD exemplifies ways of how practice, research and policy can merge and transform our current views and practices of learning for both teachers and students.

In this final article, we draw on good practices from the local context to redefine school activity as open to collaborative planning, implementation, observation, reflection, evaluation and continuous improvement. We will delineate and discuss practices emerging from schools that are in line with our belief towards transforming schools into professional learning communities.

The practices mentioned below are both drawn from mathematics education because that is the field we are currently more informed about. Yet we believe there are others who are engaging in similar innovative practices; and we would be pleased to know about these as well.

We have found that co-teaching is one effective way through which teachers may develop and learn together. Initiated in 2014-2015, two teachers at St Clare College secondary school in Pembroke joined their two ‘bottom-set’ classes and teamed up to co-teach this group.

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The idea was driven by a belief that all students can succeed in mathematics; even those placed in bottom sets. A key factor motivating their initiative was that of providing students opportunities to learn while trusting that the provision of tasks with achievable challenges may support their students to succeed in reaching higher levels than they had previously done. Indeed, they did.

Put simply, students in this co-taught class spent time doing and accessing cognitively challenging mathematical work rather than reviewing and consolidating elementary mathematical content. The work assigned was scaffolded in such a way to offer opportunities for students to access mathematics that went beyond that stated in the syllabus.

Rather than being denied the mathematical content prescribed in the higher tier syllabi, students were afforded access to knowledge that they had previously been deprived of. Jo Boaler, professor of mathematics education at Stanford University, US, would describe these two teachers as providing their students with growth mindset messages because they were instilling in students a belief that they can succeed in doing mathematics.

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The evident benefits of this collaborative venture intrigued other teachers of mathematics at the same school. Four teachers joined in 2015-2016, and this year there are five classes being co-taught at this school. Besides the benefits for students, the initiative has helped teachers in the department to work more closely, reach higher standards and learn together.

A second initiative we present is Tikka Matematika, launched by the Department of Curriculum Management to disseminate examples of sound pedagogical practices in teaching mathematics. Initiated in 2016, Tikka Matematika is a two-day conference open to teachers of mathematics. During the conference, teachers conduct presentations and lead workshops to disseminate their practices.

Last year's conference, organised by the education officer of mathematics for primary school teachers, was a truly successful event. Those who attended were positively struck with the knowledge shared by a few of the many great primary school teachers we have.

In keeping up this momentum, this year the event has been extended to include secondary school teachers' contributions. This teacher-oriented event is an outstanding example of a 'teachers learning together' approach to teacher professional development.

For lack of space, we have limited our discussion to two exemplars that we hope could lead the way to new developments in the teaching profession. We argue that initiatives such as these need to become integral to the way teachers teach, work and learn together.

When educators engage in professional development with colleagues at their school and beyond, such as those described in this article, they can learn and support each other to

raise the standards of students' learning – which is our fundamental goal. This is the cultural transformation we have in mind; one that we would hope to see.

But teachers need to be valued and respected; moreover, their work be celebrated and disseminated and it needs to drive the way we view teacher professional development. In doing so, we would be nurturing a new vision towards teaching ingrained in high-quality professional development.

Stigler and Heibert (1999) contend that learning opportunities become useful when teachers can share their knowledge and when they gain enough trust to open their classroom doors so that teaching can become a shared object of study. This is what we hope for... and we believe it is through such practices that the teaching profession may ultimately regain the status that it deserves.

It is our intention as a department to collaborate more closely with schools on CPD projects such as these. We kindly ask those interested to e-mail us.

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