



Teachers supporting teachers

Education

National

19 March 2017 | James Calleja and Christopher Bezzina |  4 min read

Times of Malta

In our previous article, we argued for a much-needed shift in the way educators engage with learning about their profession. A key concern we put forward addressed not only why educators need to collaborate but also why it is important for them to do so. Our recommendation towards making time for collaboration is based on personal beliefs and experiences but also on how teacher learning is structured within high-performing countries.

In this article, we draw on these research-based practices from such countries. We argue that schools may adopt and adapt models of teachers supporting teachers, and believe that by doing so, they may be in a better position to nurture a transformative culture of how educators, and teachers in particular, may work, teach, lead and learn together.

Most policy efforts to improve classroom teaching and school leadership tend to focus on teachers and school leaders. We argue that they should, instead, shift attention to the art of ‘teaching’ and ‘leadership’ in schools. Teaching and leadership serve as pathways through which all education reforms must travel if they are to have an impact on student learning.

Stigler and Hiebert (1999) claim that teaching is a cultural activity. Cultural activities, they argue, “are represented in cultural scripts, generalised knowledge about an event that resides in the heads of participants. These scripts guide behaviour and also tell participants what to expect.”

We sustain that the same applies to leadership. Teaching and leadership are cultural activities rooted in experiences, beliefs and practices about the ways people work, develop and learn. If our intention and expectation is to change these, we should start by

recognising that these activities can be studied and improved over time through careful and systematic study.

One diffused example of ongoing sustained learning is lesson study – the Japanese model of teacher professional development. Put simply, lesson study involves teacher-led research in which a group of teachers work together to identify an area for development in their students' learning. Teachers using lesson study engage in ongoing cycles of planning, observing and reflecting on lessons together.

Lesson study has many benefits and incorporates key elements of productive teacher learning. Since it is initiated and driven by teachers (teachers identify the problem to study and collaboratively plan the lesson), lesson study gives teachers ownership in developing expertise about teaching.

“ *Change and improvement in teaching and learning is best achieved by teachers themselves, working collaboratively towards generating research-informed practice* **”**

A second approach to teacher learning is the creation of video clubs. Video clubs provide teachers with the space and opportunity to share, analyse and reflect on their pedagogical practices by introducing videos for collaborative discussion.

During video club meetings, teachers are encouraged to select a five-minute clip showing students working in their class. When discussing video clips, participants do not judge practices but provide descriptions of the classroom environment and activity. A facilitator usually moderates the discussion by supporting participants in developing an inquiry stance to analysing practices – asking questions and investigating possibilities.

Another model is co-teaching. Co-teaching usually involves two teachers teaching the same class at the same time. Co-teachers do not just deliver lessons together but spend most of the time discussing lesson planning, student assessment and reflecting on student engagement and learning outcomes. It involves the active and ongoing communication between teachers in planning, delivering and evaluating lessons.



Co-teachers share responsibility for teaching, learning and assessment. As with other collaborative structures, co-teaching fosters ongoing support, collaborative problem solving and professional development for the teachers involved.

We believe such models are particularly effective when teachers work collaboratively in partnership with a mentor or a coach, and may become powerful tools for continuing professional development (CPD). There is consistency across research that shows the positive impacts that collaborative and sustained CPD has on teacher self-confidence, self-efficacy, wellbeing, disposition to experiment, drive to make changes and willingness for seeking deeper knowledge about teaching.

Such models of teacher learning are based on the principle that change and improvement in teaching and learning is best achieved by teachers themselves, working collaboratively towards generating research-informed practice.

Despite the many reforms implemented over the years, the substantive nature of what happens in schools, and particularly in classrooms, has stayed pretty much the same. Implementing new policies without changing the culture of teaching and leadership is heading to nowhere. It only frustrates people because 'new' policies are not likely to resonate with the present culture.

Any well-intended change, we believe, needs to originate from practitioners – it should be their responsibility. Such changes, endorsed and enacted by the school as a community, may lead to the transformation of a culture that in turn creates new meanings and systems through which teaching and leadership can cope with the ever-changing world. Such systems, we argue, require educators to be supported by policy makers to improve their profession – because professional learning is also fundamentally culturally ingrained.

Rather than imposing policies, policy makers should support and enable educators in creating collaborative school structures that facilitate their professional development and the improvement of student learning. This will be the focus in our final article, where we present local practice-based models showing applicable examples of how teachers learn with and from others.

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