TIMES OF MALTA

Making time for collaboration

Education National

12 March 2017 | Christopher Bezzina and James Calleja | 0

4 min read

Times of Malta

Teachers in countries that are doing well in international tests such as PISA also dedicate a lot of time collaborating with each other.

Teaching is still to a large extent a lonely profession. Teachers, particularly those teaching in primary school, spend most of their time with pupils in their classrooms doing countless things – from planning and giving lessons to correcting work and entering data in their assessment log books. The situation might seem less startling for secondary school teachers who usually also spend time with colleagues in staffrooms. Yet, surprisingly, we still tend to hear these teachers say they feel isolated from their colleagues.

We believe this is a cultural issue rooted in the way we have learned to do things. While teachers do have opportunities to meet and communicate with colleagues, such discussions rarely seem to address issues related to classroom practices. It almost seems that teaching is supposed to be an isolated occupation – a completely self-reliant profession.

Working in isolation certainly has some advantages – it requires less time to prepare lessons and create materials, and it bypasses judgements and critical reflection. Yet isolation also has its pitfalls, which in today's challenging environments may critically impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Working in isolation does not enhance teacher growth, learning and development because it tends to focus on the lesson as a product and not on the lesson as a process.

When teachers work collaboratively, they share ideas, critique views and consider alternatives. As a result, they facilitate the development of new insights while they build

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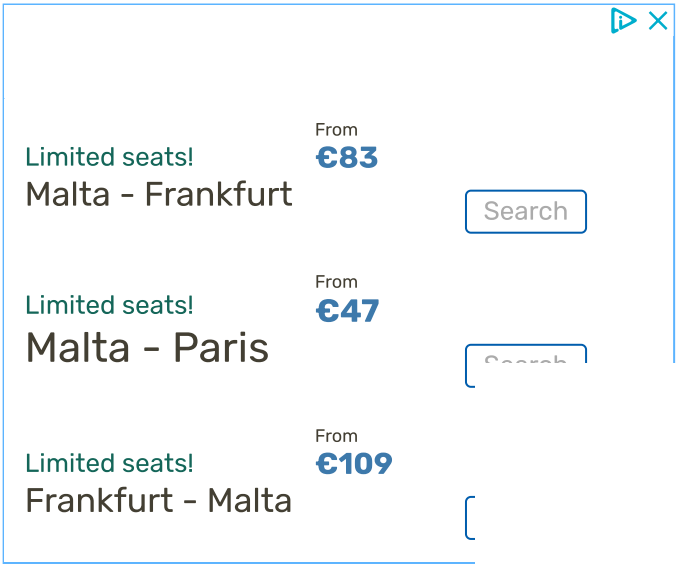
knowledge about classroom practices that enhance student learning. When teachers work together, they become responsible for one another's learning as well as their own.

We all know that teaching is becoming more complex and demanding, and it makes sense for teachers to collaborate. Various local and international studies attest to this. Just as doctors often collaborate on difficult cases, teachers need to get together to address the various issues related to policies and practices that help us reach out to all our learners.

It can be difficult to find time for collaboration, but time has to be factored into our daily practices. We argue that turning our schools into collaborative learning environments requires a cultural shift. While a lot of press is related to Pacific Rim countries such as China, Korea, Singapore and Japan – that are doing well in international tests such as PISA – they fail to mention that teachers in such countries also dedicate a lot of time collaborating with each other. Collaboration is ingrained at different levels, from planning and evaluating lessons to observing each other's classroom and providing constructive feedback.

Making time for collaboration is critical. The issue here is not about finding time, but about structuring and creating timeslots for teachers to come together and collaboratively work at developing their practices.

We need to adopt more strategic approaches to how schools manage time, and we advocate that schools/colleges make and manage their own time for collaborative learning communities to flourish.



It is here that collective agreements between the State and the Malta Union of Teachers become a crucial tool for development rather than a stumbling block, a straightjacket that determines what happens, rather than what could happen. We sincerely hope tha

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negotiations are taking this issue seriously and we long for the day when schools are given the liberty to determine how to address adult learning that is not restricted to specific days and times of the year, but towards ongoing sustained engagement.

We strongly believe that teachers and school leaders acknowledge the benefits of a collaborative work culture – they value working together to help all students learn. Yet we seem far from initiating the creation of structures and processes to pursue this goal.

We advocate a view that the learning that makes a difference does not operate within the confines of a master plan dictated by central authorities. It is one that starts with the children in mind, and the teaching and learning culture created would be one that drives how one designs the master plan for the school or college.

Various local examples show that teachers find their own ways of collaborating – both within the school day, before the school day starts or after school hours. It is the educators within the schools that develop and nurture the practices that matter.

What sectorial agreements should aim for is to liberate the notion of learning and allow schools the facility to engage in practices on a daily basis rather than at determined times of the year.

Teachers need to engage in learning in an ongoing manner. It is through ongoing collaborative engagement and professional development that schools may cultivate their culture of good teaching – and professional learning communities offer a learning environment for sharing views, knowledge and practice.

Schools that are a success have endorsed this view of making time for bottom-up driven collaboration focused on the development of practice-based knowledge about teaching.

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