



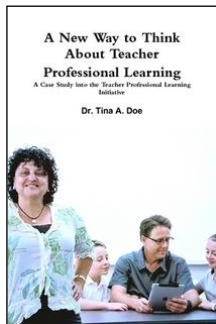
International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change. www.ijicc.net
Volume 1, Issue 3, May 2014

An Examination of an Approach to Teacher Professional Learning

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This article reports research findingsⁱ into an initiative known as the Teacher Professional Learning Initiative (TPLI). The TPLI was developed in an Australian teacher education faculty with the express purpose of preparing classroom teachers (who acted as ‘mentors’ for undergraduate teacher education students while on practicum) for; a new partnership arrangement that underpinned a rethought teacher education program at that university and the new realities of classroom teaching practice, circa 2005, as an adjunct to this new teacher education program partnership arrangement.



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This article reports research findingsⁱⁱ into an initiative known as the Teacher Professional Learning Initiative (TPLI). The TPLI was developed in an Australian teacher education faculty with the express purpose of preparing classroom teachers (who acted as ‘mentors’ for undergraduate teacher education students while on practicum) for; a new partnership arrangement that underpinned a rethought teacher education program at that university and the new realities of classroom teaching practice, circa 2005, as an adjunct to this new teacher education program partnership arrangement. Let me elaborate.

In their commentary about the changing face of education, given the emergence of the Knowledge Society (circa, 1996), Lynch & Smith (2002) argued that schooling in Australia --- in particular teaching--- was ‘stuck’ in the 19th Century’. They further argued that without significant teacher re-skilling, schools would begin to suffer an authenticity gap between what they were doing as an education system and the demands of the ‘real world’. The challenge for teacher education faculties is ‘how to’ prepare teachers for such a circumstance. In this respect the TPLI was designed to address these consequential knowledge society impacts on teachers and to also support student teachers whilst on practicum. In effect, the TPLI attempts to bring university teacher educators, ‘mentor teachers’ and their teacher education students together so as to improve teacher skills in both current (the mentor teacher) and future (student teachers) teachers.

While the TPLI is a major initiative with a number of components the concern for this article is one of practising teachers and their perceptions of the TPLI’s use of a common language of instruction.

The TPLI Explained

The TPLI engages teacher participants in specific activities focused on improving each teacher’s teaching practice. The TPLI does this by enabling collegially-based learning opportunities that are linked to solving authentic problems around pupil achievement through action learning activities (Hogan, 2001). In this approach there is a strong emphasis on the connection between teacher learning and pupil learning to provide a collegial, real-life learning experience for both current and future teachers. The introduction of an agreed and evidence based common language of instruction features highly. In the case of the TPLI, the common language of instruction was initially constituted by the Dimensions of Learning¹. In subsequent use of the TPLI the common language has included the Art and Science of Teaching (Marzano, 2007), Classroom Instruction that Works (McREL, 2000; 2008) and Explicit Instruction (Fleming, 2007).

By contrast, traditional approaches to teacher professional learning occur in single or short sequences of presenter focused ‘sessions’ that give limited consideration to the profile of the learning needs of each teacher attending, what Doe (2011) calls professional development. These sessions are seldom attended by student teachers. Most topics are systemically driven and often focused on policy understanding (DEST, 2001; Downes et al., 2001; McRae et al., 2001; QCT, 2006). In the TPLI a professional learning facilitator (teacher educator) works with a group of classroom teachers assisting them to pose questions relevant to their teaching circumstance and or Instructional Leadership and then supporting them to solve such problems, chiefly through processes of collaboration, mentoring and feedback in a context of

¹ See: <http://files.hbe.com.au/samplepages/197133.pdf>



purpose-fit professional learning sessions (Bloomfield, 2009; Timperley, 2008; Dinham, 2008b).

The distinguishing element in the TPLI is that teacher learning occurs through a focus on each teacher's practice, their reflection on the process and the outcomes through coaching and mentoring and the sharing of findings with others. The introduction of a common language of instruction was a key to-be learnt element which teachers agreed to engage with as part of the TPLI. The TPLI is unique in that it also includes the under-graduate teaching students assigned to each teacher. In effect the TPLI, with the aid of a university based 'professional learning facilitator', translates research evidence (theory) into teaching practice through a collaborative professional network. Dinham (2008b) refers to this type of professional learning, where the intention is to bridge the theory/practice divide, as a 'learning community'.

Parker (2005), states that professional learning has the potential to generate 'learning communities' because of the connection between knowledge, community, learning, and identity. Wenger's (2008) observation that human knowing is fundamentally a social act has profound implications for the way we think of, and attempt to support, learning and the benefits gained from working through learning communities. The view of learning as an integral part of participation suggests that action and learning are intertwined and that people's learning is a part of their interaction with others and the environment (Felstead et. al, 2005). Chapell (2003) suggests that such action learning processes result in the 'active construction of knowledge by individuals that is context dependant, socially mediated and situated in the 'real world' by learners' (p.9).

Results of a study into the TPLI

To determine the effects of the TPLI on participating teachers and their teaching practice a mixed methods research study was developed and implemented in 2004. While student teachers featured in the TPLI, they are not included in this study given the focus for this article is on practising classroom teachers. The study comprised a survey (n= 12 schools and n= 49 teachers) and a series of follow-up focus group interviews with a random sample of stakeholders from both the university and the schools who were involved (n= 13). Teachers had a range of service years as outlined in Table 1

Table 1 Years of teacher service

Years of service	Teachers
1-4	7
5-10	6
11-15	7
15+	29
Total	49

Questions in the survey and the focus group interviews were organised according to a series of categories which represented an element of the TPLI design and implementation strategy. The data collected was then coded according to each category and through refining processes



a series of themes emerged. These themes represent findings with respect to the TPLI and they are reported in the following sections.

With respect to the category of 'professional learning', which encompasses the learning intent of the TPLI, teachers tended to indicate that the TPLI had a positive impact on their teaching practice. One teacher (T23) commented, which was typical of most responses, "working together to improve and enhance learning outcomes for all of us was a great experience". Comments such as "everyone moving in the same direction creates a common sense of teacher collegiality" (T17), 'great stuff' (T2), and "great to see and hear conversations and teachers working in teams" (T14), were common theme. However the majority of teachers (66%) did not yet see the full pedagogical value in the use of the 'common language of instruction', which was a key feature of the TPLI.

There was evidence that indicated teachers were beginning to use the common language of instruction as a shared lens for Instructional Leadership, but responses tended to reflect their focus on their own classroom based problems. When teachers were asked in the survey about their perceptions of the common language of instruction, the range of responses varied from 'confused' and 'informed' to 'excited'. Data indicated however that the TPLI had contributed to teachers' ability to work collegially, and had enhanced pedagogical conversations.

With respect to the category of each teacher's 'individual professional learning needs' results tended to suggest that the TPLI developed a learning community which supported the teachers own professional learning profile, however comments made by teachers tended to reinforce the need for the TPLI to give greater consideration to the priorities of their respective school. Teachers tended to make comments such as "professional learning needs to be complementary to the priorities of my school, rather than an additional, component of my workload" (T17). This type of comment tended to reflect the pressures that incline traditional approaches to professional learning to focus on the system needs rather than that of the teacher's professional learning needs.

66% of surveyed teachers described the value of the TPLI in terms of its contribution to their school's overall approach to pedagogy and teacher planning. 60% also identified improvements in their teacher networks and in the relationship they had with the university as a result of their involvement in the TPLI. This tends to indicate that the TPLI is a useful mechanism in focusing a school to core teaching elements such as pedagogy and classroom planning, but also useful to universities in establishing meaningful teacher education relationships with schools and their teachers. However only 43% of teachers made comment that the TPLI created a useful way through which teachers could reflect on and improve their own practice: a core component of the TPLI.

Interestingly 90% made comment that the common language of instruction was most effective in enabling them to provide feedback and coaching to the teaching student and also enabled teachers to assist their teaching student to reflect on and improve their (the students) teaching practice. Further, when teachers were probed during interview about the common language of instruction outside the context of working with teaching students only 36% of teachers agreed (4% strong agreement) it was useful to them as teachers.



Of those teachers (n= 29 or 66%) who agreed that the common language of instruction provided a useful tool to improve their own teaching practice only 35% of these respondents (n=10), thought it had applicability for 'other schools' and their teachers. On further analysis this tends to indicate that teacher perceptions about the common language of instruction are dependent upon a number of variables, ranging from their initial reasons for involvement in the TPLI (whether it was voluntary to be involved and not mandated) to the quality of the university TPLI facilitator (not all facilitators were highly valued by teachers and as such represents a deficiency that needs to be addressed in the TPLI program), to the alignment of the common language of instruction to each individual school's priorities.

Examining the TPLI facilitator role further, data reveals that 90% of teachers either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that it is the university TPLI facilitator who is a key variable in the quality of the TPLI . Further analysis of data indicated that there was a positive correlation between teachers who indicated the TPLIs positive impact on them and teachers who indicated their TPLI facilitator was of high quality.

Summary and Conclusions

This research was undertaken in response to contemporary schooling problems and issues as briefly outlined in an earlier section. The Teacher Professional Learning Initiative (TPLI) was intended to create opportunities to enhance teacher practice through professional learning. The TPLI was designed to enhance practice for both practising teachers and their student teachers, specifically through facilitated professional learning activities focused on a common language of instruction and teacher collaborative processes.

It would appear on balance that when the TPLI has 'first principle status' --- i.e. it is considered a priority by the school and as such fits the school's strategic intents and plans--- it can be a mechanism to improve the process of teacher professional learning in a school. Since the TPLI facilitator is a key component in the TPLI and in fostering the associated relationships with and between teachers, which are critical to the TPLI premise, the quality of the facilitator must be assured for overall TPLI effect. The study reveals the TPLI is efficacious in enabling practising teachers to work with student teachers. This is perhaps a reflection of the 'connecting' role that the common language of instruction plays with the teaching students university program and gives insight into the usefulness of a common language of instruction as a shared lens for 'learning to teach' purposes.

In conclusion the greatest strength of the TPLI appears to be its capacity to create a networked learning community which is considered crucial for practising teachers and student teachers alike. The TPLI appears to be an effective mechanism for engaging teachers in the type of professional learning where collaboration acts to assist them in solving their teaching dilemmas which lies at the heart of the reasons for which teachers will want to engage in a TPLI to improve their practice. The premise of enacting a common language of instruction through a TPLI arrangement is contingent on a number of variables, which went dealt with appropriately, may also prove effective in a TPLI type Instructional Leadership Model.



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ⁱ The research in this document has been sourced from *A New Way to Think About Teacher Professional Learning*. Located at <http://www.lulu.com/shop/tina-doe/a-new-way-to-think-about-teacher-professional-learning/paperback/product-20631548.html>

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International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change. www.ijicc.net
Volume 1, Issue 3, May 2014

