

Teachers, Learners, Leaders:
Joining Practice, Policy & Research

By Ann Lieberman

What if the professional development of experienced teachers was a project run by teachers? What if the money to support the project came **directly** to teachers? What if the purpose was not only professional learning, but leadership development of teachers and the exchange of knowledge with others? What if this program was a collaboration between the teacher's union, (Ontario Teachers' Federation and its Affiliates) and the province's Ministry of Education (like the state department of education)?

All these questions can be answered by a program which exists in Ontario, Canada where there are approximately 120,000 teachers working in the publicly funded k-12 schools. Ontario is a province of 2 million students with a range of Boards including English, French, Catholic, Public, Urban and Rural schools. The program began in 2007-08 and there have been three cohorts of teachers serving 225 projects involving approximately 1500 people - mostly teachers. Eighty three (83%) of the projects are group projects and seventeen (17%) are single projects. How this came about, the characteristics of the program and some examples of teacher and student learning as well as leadership is the stuff of this article. What follows is the context within which the Teacher Leadership and Learning Program (TLLP) developed; a description of the program and the kinds of projects that teachers have taken on as well as an in depth look at several; and what we can learn from this program that joins research, policy and practice in a collaborative effort.

The Context of TLLP: Building the Collaboration

A newly elected Minister of Education called together a Working Table on Teacher Development in 2005. This government recognized the need to bring all stakeholders together in some form if they were going to truly change and enhance education in Ontario. The new government and its Ministry of Education which took office in 2003 was determined to create a professional development program that had meaningful supports for teachers, would be sustained over a number of years and would be collaborative. Those in attendance at the Working Table included all those who represented schools including the Ontario Teachers's Federation (OTF) and its affiliates. Recognizing that the quality of teaching is the single most important variable related to student learning, the Working Table was given the responsibility to make recommendations on effective supports for the professional learning of teachers as a result of their deliberations.

Defining Professional Learning: Opting for Choice

The Working Table first made a distinction between *training* (which is required for the job); *staff development* (which is a system-wide set of activities *not* chosen by the teacher, but driven by the system's needs (eg. early literacy): and *professional development* (activities that are self-chosen where teachers can work individually or as part of a group (eg. action research, lesson study, , etc.). They decided on the latter definition as it reflected a growing understanding amongst the participants at the Working Table that teachers have different needs and styles and should be given different opportunities to act upon them. Choice for teachers had to be a centerpiece of the program as did coherence – the connection between educational needs set by the

Ministry, Board or school. In this way both the needs of teachers and the needs of the Boards could be accommodated.

Professional Development: Joining Student and Teacher Learning

The Working Table then decided that effective professional development needed to insure a positive impact on students as well as teachers. Toward that end they developed the following characteristics:

- Professional learning needs to be **coherent**, built on the “three R’s” of respect, responsibility and results being mindful of the teachers’ sense of professionalism and the complexity of teachers’ learning. The ultimate learning must have a positive impact on students and school success.
- Professional learning should be attentive to **adult learning styles**. By this they meant that the program should be viewed as meaningful, relevant and substantive. And that it should consider the role of choice which would allow for different content and modes of delivery.
- Professional learning is enhanced when it is **goal-oriented** and is connected to improved student learning as well as to daily practice and is respectful of varied contexts.
- Professional learning that is going to have an impact and be **sustainable** needs appropriate resources; takes place over time; involves time for practice; self-assessment; and a support system from other staff.
- Professional learning should be built upon **evidence-informed research** as well as both formal and informal data. This, they felt, would give the “most up-to-date

theories and practices” known and would be consonant with the needs of both teachers and students (Working Table Report, 2007).

The Working Table concluded that the Ministry should help develop structures that would coordinate the professional learning effort such as a proposal application, program guidelines, etc. In addition they also decided that the program should help encourage the tremendous resource they had in the many experienced teachers who could provide **peer leadership**. And lastly the group was concerned that somehow what teachers were learning should be **shared** in some way.

Research on Professional Development: Joining Leadership & Learning

As part of the work of the Working Table, the Ministry asked two university professors to write an extensive review of the literature on the content and delivery modes of professional development for experienced teachers (Broad & Evans, 2006). In this way the Working Table felt that they would have both the knowledge and experience created by the group and also what had been written by a broader group of researchers.

The ideas of the Working Table and the Review of Literature by university researchers, formed the basis for the **Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP)**.

Another suggestion was considered. Wherever possible, those who apply for a grant should consider a **team approach** including peers, resource teachers and/or others. The design development and sustainability of the program continues to be made collectively by the Ministry and the Federation and, as a result trust, commitment and transparency have made this a strong collaboration.

Description of the TLLP

A short application was designed for teachers to be sent for consideration of their proposed work. The proposal asks for the name and summary of the project; how the project addresses the participants' professional learning; how the project outcomes contribute to student learning; and the experience that teachers bring to their particular project. In another section, teachers need to describe their goals, activities, budget and how they will measure the outcomes of their project (as well as what they learn along the way). In a last section, teachers are asked to describe both the goals and activities that they will organize to share the learning with their colleagues. The range of the proposals is from \$1,000 to around \$10,000 with a few going well beyond this as teachers are encouraged to expand their project to other schools, networks, and regions. So far 93% of the projects involve teachers engaging in professional development in their own schools; 91% include other schools in their district; and 43% include other groups (eg. conferences, websites, publications)

Introducing Leadership Knowledge and Support

When an entire cohort has been chosen, a big conference is held to give support to the teachers; to clarify any questions about finances, to show Ministry and Federation support,; and to offer a variety of sessions that provide for skill and knowledge building in “leading” these projects. Examples of these sessions include:

- Developing and delivering a dynamic workshop;
- Working with your team: facilitation skills;
- Persuasion not pontification: promoting your project;
- Sharing TLLP learning through technology (introductory and advanced);
- What do you know now that you didn't know then?

Many projects have a team leader and partner, or, in some cases, an entire team that attends together from the start. Meeting together with other participants in the beginning provides the teachers with not only motivation, but a realization that they are part of something much larger than themselves and that their leadership and learning can be a part of improving the lives of students as they stretch themselves and become members of this developing professional community.

Looking Inside the Projects: Learning, Leadership and Building Community

A look at some of the projects gives a picture of what teachers are working on and, in some ways, gives us the breadth and depth of what is possible when teachers have a voice in organizing professional development that connects to their own contexts, strengths, interests and needs. Amongst the three cohorts that have been chosen so far the range of projects is dazzling. It goes from: “Working together to Improve Boys Literacy” (in both French and English), to “Teachers with Technology – Engaging Young Readers with E-books” to “HIP: High Interest Programs” that are multi-disciplinary in an attempt to create project based programs with “real world” value to “A Plan for Work World Readiness” which helps prepare students for their eventual careers to projects integrating music into language arts, science and social studies and more. There are projects on math, science, music, art and every subject in k-12 schools as well as some teacher devised support strategies that keep students from falling through the cracks like “The Success Room” for 7th and 8th grades who are having some kind of difficulty. In this project several teachers work with students and their peers until both teacher and student find success. There are approaches that engage groups of teachers within their own

school with teachers teaching the same subject matter and with others in the Board (district). Three examples give us a sense of how TLLP works in different contexts, ways of working and subject areas. They also show us that when people have more freedom to design their own improvement they form all kinds of collaborations.

Teacher Projects: Focus on Practice

To get inside the power of the program, I highlight three teachers to get a sense of what teachers are doing, **how** they are doing it as well as the **impact** of their work.

Nicole Walter Rowan wrote in a proposal that she and her colleagues were going to work on: “**Developing Mathematical Models in Realistic Contexts utilizing effective Oral Language Strategies: How they impact student understanding and communication in new problem solving situations” in their urban school.** She was fortunate in that an earlier project, *Teachers Learning Together (TLT)*, involved her and some colleagues in a small action research project funded by the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario. Inspired by some reading and research about the ideas inherent in using math talk to help students, the group got excited about the possibility of a real project where the teachers could work together to improve their own understanding of teaching and learning math. TLLP gave Nicole Walter Rowan, and a group of colleagues the opportunity to form a Leadership team. This team worked *alongside* other teachers who formed a working collaborative working relationship in their school. Aided by a university professor and a staff developer from New York, the team used a published video of exemplary math teaching that modeled rich student discourse as well as a portrait of the teacher role during a math period. This was the first step in understanding math talk in the classroom.

The Leadership Team co-taught with seven other teachers at the school, collaboratively planning, teaching and debriefing lessons. They used the video to study and analyze teacher actions and student behaviors and debriefed together. In so doing, the group developed a shared vocabulary and began to understand together what a classroom involved in mathematical problem solving could look like.

The impact was powerful. Teachers began to understand what it meant to be in a math learning community. In the process they showed increased confidence in identifying how to ask questions of students and how to elicit responses from students that showed math understandings and many, for the first time, went public with their teaching. Shared knowledge and a shared vocabulary made it easier to use a critical lens on everyone's instructional practices and to give critical feedback to each other as a natural part of the learning process. Over time the whole team began to realize that a professional learning community was in the making and that the research they were learning was being authenticated and expanded by their new practices. And, in this case another board (like a district) has taken notice of this work as they are interested in supporting an initiative of this kind.

Matt Armstrong, Heather Murphy and Anne Doorly proposed that they were going to work on: **Building Literacy through the use of Graphic Texts in an Adult School.** (An Adult School is where students can make up grades, take additional courses, etc.) Graphic texts have been used to help students who need extra motivation to continue reading and who also need to learn reading skills. In this case, the team had already worked extensively on the use of graphic texts in their own classes and was ready to provide workshops on instructional strategies with others. They had field tested the

idea and had organized all the work in a binder that could be shared with teachers and was easy to read. Starting in their own school with five teachers who teach English, the team worked with and introduced materials for their use. All five teachers are using the graphic novel in their classes as a result of the team's workshops.

On English Professional Development Day, the team presented its work to English teachers outside their own school. Heather Murphy and Anne Doorly presented on this day to rave reviews from their colleagues. The team also provided an electronic version of graphic texts so that teachers could make changes to fit their individual needs. They were very well received with "outside" teachers, having had the experience of working with their peers "inside" their own school.

In addition, at a board-wide workshop, thirty other teachers as well as several ESL teachers were in attendance. Evaluations showed that there was an outstanding response to the team's workshop. In addition, Matt Armstrong shared his work with the new cohort of the TLLP, thus making this work available to an audience of teachers from all over the province.

In this case, the use of graphic texts and the materials to go with the strategy had been field tested over a period of time and the team felt they were ready to facilitate the strategies for its use in and beyond their school. Teachers relished the practical and flexible materials that they could use and the team learned with each audience how to facilitate the learning of their peers.

Christopher W. Charman and Dan Ballantyne proposed: **Building a Community of Critical Thinkers through Higher Order Questioning.** Chris, head of Geography at Huron Heights Secondary, and Dan a history and civics teacher at Bluevale Collegiate,

joined together their respective skills and subject areas and proposed to create a “pilot project” on critical thinking which would start with history and geography and eventually be used across the curriculum. They made use of “The Critical Thinking Consortium” a group (<http://www.tc2.ca.wp/>) which has developed materials and techniques for use with teachers when they join as members. In this project two history and two geography teachers from the Board (32 teachers) were invited to three workshops during the year. The first workshop presented the ideas; followed by exploring the uses participants found for Critical Thinking, and the last brought people together to discuss the ideas and the challenges they faced in their classrooms. The co-leaders were attempting to introduce the idea that an inquiry approach to learning, rather than looking for right and wrong answers, would help students develop an understanding of the complexity of many of the issues they were studying. Although the Board promised to expand the role of critical thinking in the system, they are now going in a different direction. Five team members are using the new techniques and strategies in their classes. In this case, the co-leaders learned how to plan and execute workshops teaching them many things about “teaching teachers” and what it takes to create professional development that matters.

What can we learn: about Leadership, Learning and a Collaborative Stance?

Teachers teaching teachers is a powerful strategy for finding, developing and utilizing the talents of teachers and is at the heart of this program. TLLP provides us with an example of what can happen when teachers are given an opportunity to propose professional development efforts based on what they know, what they want to learn, and how they learn to share and facilitate learning with their peers. TLLP provides us with a rethinking of the professional development paradigm that goes for compliance rather than

collaboration; disparaging teacher unions rather than building shared solutions; thinking of professional development from the “outside” without participation and partnership from the “inside”; and research imposed on teachers without the practice that roots new knowledge in the everyday work of teaching and learning. This professional development program gives us a robust example of how to join practice, research and enabling policy (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995) to change teaching, learning and leading for both the adults and their students.

Notes

Broad, K & M Evans (2006) A Review of Literature on Professional Development Content and Delivery Modes for Experienced Teachers. Prepared for the Ministry of Education in Toronto, Ontario.

Darling-Hammond, L. & M.W. McLaughlin(1995) Policies the support professional development in an era of reform. The Kappan, Vol. 76.

Working Table Report to the Partnership Table on Professional Learning, May 14, 2007 Ontario, Canada

Other large scale projects that have involved collaboration between policy makers, researchers and teachers include:

Hargreaves, A. & D. Shirley (2009) *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change*. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Corwin Press

Levin, B. (2008) *How to change 5000 schools: A Practical and Positive Approach for Leading Change at Every Level*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lieberman, A. & D. Wood (2002) *Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.