

TEACHER LEARNING CIRCLES: A LOCALLY OWNED COMPLEMENT TO COACHING

Coaching is a welcome response to the need for active and continual teacher capacity development, serving as an update to the passive one-time training sessions of the more traditional models.¹ Coaching provides significant short-term impact,² but comes with potential long-term sustainability issues, due to its high price tag³ and possible lack of local ownership. Teacher learning circles (TLCs) could serve as a promising addition to the existing coaching model by addressing these two fundamental problems. The Georgia Primary Education Project (G-PriEd) has put this model to the test by using TLCs in its programming. The learning circles have already positively impacted teachers’ instructional practices in the short-term and are poised to continue doing so for the long-term, thanks to the TLC model’s low cost and high local ownership.⁴

“The aim of [capacity development] is not simply to improve the level and effectiveness of current operations, rather the aim is to ensure that the institution will be able to maintain this improved performance in the future, in particular, when the external assistance is withdrawn.”

— USAID’s G2G Education Toolkit, 2013

Best practices in capacity development.

Best practices for teacher capacity development have moved beyond in-service training as the preferred modality and to methods involving school-based **collaboration, dialogue, reflection, inquiry,** and **leadership**. Teachers who participate in more continuous and collaborative training sessions are more likely to implement newly learned instructional practices than those who participate in more traditional training (one time occurrences with little follow-up).⁵

How Teacher Learning Circles Work

TLCs are small teacher communities that learn from and support one another, with the ultimate aim of improving student learning outcomes. The groups reflect on current teaching practices and seek ways to enhance their instructional effectiveness. The steps in TLCs are **Reflection, Learning, Planning, Action,** and **Evaluation**.

Teacher learning circles embody best practices (see above) in that they are highly collaborative and heavily focused on building local dialogue and leadership. In addition, while TLCs have similar upfront costs to coaching models with regard to training TLC facilitators, they tend to have fewer long-term carrying costs, as they don’t come with transportation expenses or the high monthly salaries of coaches.



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TLCs in Action

G-PriEd designed and implemented the TLC model of professional development in 122 schools, attending to the country's need to better mentor and coach its teachers. The project and Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science originally considered a coaching model, but ultimately selected the TLC model as a creative and collaborative alternative, with the additional benefit of minimal cost. The project also provided low-cost facilitator training and follow-up classroom visits. The result was a locally owned and cost-effective way to continually build skills and capacity among teachers. The TLCs united teachers to discuss new methodologies, interpret student data, and share common classroom struggles. They also used model instructional videos, online courses, and project materials to reinforce learning. In addition, the project trained principals to conduct classroom observations and oversee the progress of learning circles.

TLC Impact

The existing data showcases the project's positive impact on teachers (G-PriEd is conducting its final impact assessment on student learning throughout 2016):



81% of teachers regularly used project-developed methodology and instructional materials in teacher process.

98% of principals agreed or strongly agreed that participation in G-PriEd increased collaboration among the professional staff in [his/her] school.

120,000 students and 465 schools committed to participate in G-PriEd programs in 2015-2016, far exceeding the anticipated target of 180 schools and 40,000 students. G-PriEd's widespread success led to this increased interest.

Evidence increasingly suggests that high quality instruction has positive long-term effects on students.⁶ Therefore, the above data may not only showcase the positive impact of TLCs on teacher growth, but also suggest that TLCs have strong potential to impact student learning.

Next Steps

School management. G-PriEd made two recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MES) in 2014: 1. Principals are responsible for observing teachers' classroom performance; and 2. Principals are the instructional leaders in schools. Continuing to involve school management in teacher learning, as G-PriEd has in this example, is essential to sustaining locally owned teacher capacity development efforts, such as TLCs.

Policies. While the above recommendations to the MES serve as a foundation for continued growth in TLCs, more formal policy changes are likely necessary to sustain this progress. Some examples of potential policy changes include: changes to teacher employment contracts to include participation in school-based learning activities; changes to school budget policy, ensuring budgets flexible enough to accommodate such capacity development opportunities; and school-level policy changes to allow for flexible teacher scheduling.

^{1,5} Desimone, et al. (2002) Does professional development change teachers' instruction? Results from a three-year study. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 2.

² Knight, D. (2012) Assessing the cost of instructional coaching. *Journal of Education Finance*. University of Illinois Press. Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 52-80.

³ Odden, et al. (2002) A cost framework for professional development. *Journal of Education Finance*, 28 (1), 51-74.

⁴ Cordingley, et al. (2003) The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning. Research Evidence in Education Library. London.

⁶ Chetty, et al. (2011) The long-term impacts of teachers: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in Cambridge, MA. National Bureau of Economic Research.