

Impact of Professional Learning Community Participation on Teachers' Thinking about Classroom Problems

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Abstract

Teacher education seems to exhibit a shift from product-oriented mode to social constructivist, process-oriented mode of working. The emergence of professional learning communities (PLCs) of teachers may be seen as one manifestation of this shift. PLCs are increasingly seen as an effective channel for teacher learning and professional development. This article presents the findings of a small-scale research into the impact of the participation in a PLC called English Teachers' Clubs (ETCs) on teachers' thinking about and attitudes towards classroom problems in a central Indian context. It has been found that the participation in ETCs has led to better performance among the members in terms of contextualisation of the problems, critical approach to the problems, belief in self-agency and pragmatic approach to finding solutions.

Introduction

Classrooms, the sites of educational business, are often metaphorically equated to battlefields, where teacher-soldiers have to wage a war of education against all odds. Classrooms are sites riddled with innumerable problems, and teachers are those who have to face them immediately and directly. The success of the war depends on how effectively these problems are dealt with. This requires, on the one hand, minimising the occurrence of problems, and on the other, equipping teachers to confront them effectively. Teacher education is usually concerned with the latter, and seeks a clear focus on continuous professional development. One popular and prevalent way of addressing this has been organising training programmes, short courses, and academic sessions that are normally "one-off" events.

However, there is a general consensus (at least in word if not in deed) among researchers and practitioners in the field that one-off training/education events are of little help. These events often end up providing "imported" solutions to teachers' problems. Following Schö (1987), it is largely admitted that solutions found in a laboratory set up ("high ground") are not applicable to real classroom life where may resemble more of a "swamp." Therefore, there is now a visible shift from a product-oriented working mode to a social constructivist, process-oriented mode of working in teacher education (Crandall, 2000). One of the manifestations of this shift is the emergence of professional learning communities (PLCs) of teachers. PLCs are increasingly seen as an effective channel for teacher learning and professional development. There are several studies pointing out the positive impact of membership in a PLC on member-teachers' personal and professional growth (see Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997; Cochran & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman, 2000; Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 2002; Huang, 2007 & Vescio et al., 2008).

This article presents the findings of a small-scale research into the impact of the participation in a PLC called English Teachers' Clubs (ETCs) on teachers' thinking about and attitudes towards classroom problems in a central Indian context. The study tried to explore whether membership in ETCs was associated with attitudinal change among teachers, and how the thinking of ETC-member-teachers about classroom problems differed from that of the non-members.

Background: English Teachers' Clubs

Although there is no standard definition of a PLC, it is seen to be a community of professionals who come together for sharing, interaction, and mutual support leading to personal and professional growth. Louis and Stoll observe that a PLC is "a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth promoting way" (2007, p. 2). We are convinced that ETCs are PLCs in this sense. They use capacity-building approach through the use of motivational strategies and sidestep the limitations of institutions and institutional roles. They are essentially self-help groups of teachers coming together voluntarily to address the problems of classroom life both for teachers and students, and implicitly, to develop professionally.

ETCs are a phenomenon slowly evolving in central India. They are typically small-sized groups, with membership ranging between 10 and 20. The members include a mix of secondary, higher secondary, and tertiary level teachers, both male and female, with a very small number of primary teachers. These members are mostly in the 25-40 age group, though there are a few between 45 and 55. Most ETCs operate in semi-urban areas and involve teachers from different schools and colleges in and around the town. It all started with one small group of teachers in a town (Bhandara) meeting frequently to address their immediate problems related to the then drastic curriculum reform, but then staying on as a group and continuing the interaction and collective activities for improving themselves. Later, through a British Council and Hornby Trust supported project, attempts were made to replicate the idea in other places, which led

to the launch of several more ETCs. However, only four of the twenty ETCs launched after the project still meet. The second round of the project is underway now, in the first phase of which about 30 people have been trained and oriented towards setting up and managing ETCs in their own areas.

The ETCs organize a variety of activities, such as "sharing meetings" for the exchange of experiences, ideas and feelings, group discussions, collective study, language enhancement sessions, workshops, attending seminars and conferences, and so on. They are "discourse communities where teachers address tough problems of teaching through exchange among members rather than talked at by experts" (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). They encourage reflective dialogue leading to extensive and continuing conversation among teachers about curriculum, instruction and student learning. Further, they help in making practice more public by offering teachers space to share their experiences and experiments. The primary mode of operation in ETCs is talk--the "fuel of teacher development" (Wright, 2000). The ETCs have also emerged as a strategy to cope with changes in school curriculum, teaching practices, evaluation systems and teacher roles. In this sense, ETCs work towards management of change in ELT through solving teachers' problems.

Research Questions

Teachers' attitudes toward classroom problems strongly influence both the students' learning and teachers' learning and professional development. Our goal in this research was to compare the views about classroom problems of teachers who are members of a PLC with the views of the teachers who do not belong to any PLC to see whether the participation in PLCs has any impact on teachers' thinking about classroom problems. The research questions were:

- Is there any difference in thinking about teaching-related problems between the teachers who are members of a PLC and those who are not?
- What are the tangible features, if any, of such difference?

Participants

The study involved 18 teachers of English, mostly from secondary and higher secondary levels, 11 of whom are members of ETCs working in two places. The remaining 7 are not members of any PLC. The participants include both male and female teachers, their ages ranging from 32 to 45, except for one person who was 24 and another one 57. The teaching experience of the teachers ranged from 7 to 18 years, except for one teacher with 33 years of experience and two more with one year of experience each. For better comparison, efforts were made to involve participants with similar profiles from both the groups (ETC members and non-ETC-members).

Data Collection

We elicited teachers' views and attitudes towards classroom problems in general, and how they tried to sort these out in particular. For this, we asked participants to write a structured narrative of their classroom work based on prompts given as questions. For the purpose of this study, only eight most commonly cited problems were selected for the teachers to consider and respond to. Some of the problems (numbered 1 to 5 below) were perceived as problems by a large number of teachers; they were frequently mentioned in the formal and informal feedback and first-hand personal information gathered by us over the past few years at numerous teacher training programmes, workshops, and professional ELT events. We include more problems (numbered 6, 7 and 8 below) on the basis of our firsthand experience of the context, and frequent references to them found in many research studies. The eight problems were:

1. Students' lack of interest in learning
2. Low ability of learners
3. Lack of resources
4. Large classes
5. Shortage of time
6. Current evaluation systems
7. Centrally prescribed textbooks
8. Irrelevant syllabuses and courses

The overall purpose of relying on narratives was to have realistic, subjective, and descriptive data. Cortazzi (1994) states that narratives serve two purposes: first they have referential function giving "the audience information through the teller's recapitulation of experience" and evaluative function giving "the meaning of the narrative by establishing personal involvement through the evaluative section" (p. 160). He further discusses the significance of narratives in educational research saying, "[a] narrative is a prime vehicle for teachers' voices, to present their views and meaningful experience" (1994, p. 164). Since our aim was to examine attitudinal perspectives, we considered narratives as one good way of reflecting the thought processes of the participants. We are aware of the limitations of using narratives as a means of research and the possible dangers of self-justification, self-glorification and "inventing stories." We have tried to minimise this possibility by avoiding any question or expression that might endanger the participants' self-esteem, and by asking open-ended questions, giving the respondents freedom of how much to say. Additionally, we personally have been associated with the two ETCs as initiators and members. We also have known most of the respondents, including the non-ETC-members, long enough to be able to notice obviously unreliable information. Thus, we have tried to use our understanding of these ETCs and the participants as a source of validation with the narratives as our primary data. This has been a complication in this research, as we had to maintain an objective stance in looking at the ETCs. McCotter (2001) reports the same challenge in her research on the functioning of a teacher network of which she was a member. She says, "One [issue in the research] was the complication of simultaneously being a researcher and a participant, having to constantly separate my sense of belonging from the need to observe analytically, if not

objectively" (p. 687). But, she claims that research is possible in such contexts citing Krieger's (1996) argument that "efforts to avoid the role of the self are, essentially, a form of self-deception" (p. 687). We take the same position in the present study.

Discussion of Emergent Issues

Statistical Information

The narratives revealed rich evidence in showing teachers' attitudes toward classroom problems. The responses ranged from absolute acceptance of a problem to absolute negation. The Table 1 presents a clear picture of teacher responses to question prompts.

Table 1. Summary of Teachers' Responses to Prompts

S No.	Prompt	ETC members considering it... (N=11)			Non-ETC-members considering it... (N=7)		
		A problem	Not a problem	Uncertain/ no answer	A problem	Not a problem	Uncertain/ no answer
1	Students' lack of interest in learning	10	1	--	6	1	--
2	Low ability of learners	9	2	--	6	1	--
3	Lack of resources	6	5	--	4	3	--
4	Large classes	10	1	--	6	1	--
5	Shortage of time	9	1	1	4	3	--
6	Current evaluation systems	4	6	1	2	4	1
7	Centrally prescribed textbooks	5	6	--	3	4	--
8	Irrelevant syllabuses and courses	7	4	--	3	4	--

As the above data show, there is little difference between ETC-members' and non-members' perception about what constitutes a problem and what does not. The pattern of respondents viewing or not viewing a given issue as a problem is almost the same for the members and the non-members. This validates the assumption that the

problems chosen for consideration are common for teachers. Although the patterns do not show much difference, there are differences in the ways the ETC-members and non-members perceive and approach these problems, as is discussed later in this study.

An interesting change of pattern can be seen when we compare responses to problems 1 to 5 with the responses to problems 6 to 8. A large number of respondents perceive problems 1 to 5 as problems, while a considerable number of them do not view problems 6 to 8 as problems. This is not surprising, though, because the first set of problems is sourced from teachers' feedback, while the second set comes from theory and research. It will be inappropriate to do anything more than wonder whether this means that teachers have a conciliatory attitude towards issues like 6, 7 and 8, or whether the theory/ research is misreading the practical reality.

Issues from Narratives

A closer reading of the narratives further confirms the differing attitudes towards classroom problems among PLC-members and non-PLC-members. They present various crucial issues that can be used as signposts in discussing attitudinal differences. The following key issues, which seem to emerge from the reading of narratives, provide a useful framework for comparing the perceptions and attitudes of the members and non-members of PLCs:

- Contextualisation of the problems
- Critical approach to the problems
- Belief in Self agency
- Pragmatic approach to finding solutions

Contextualisation of Problems

There is a clear indication that most respondents perceived the suggested problems as 'problems' with enough potential to influence their routine work. However, the belief pattern is different between the members of the ETCs and the non-members. The members seem to think in more concrete terms about each problem, to try to situate them in their own contexts, and to see them from their immediate individual realities. On the other hand, the non-members seem to view the problems in broader, more abstract terms, often with sweeping generalization, and not from any specific concrete context. Almost all ETC-members talk about their own classroom and their actual personal experience, while most non-members talk about the wider community and the larger system.

For example, respondent S/E-3 (an ETC-member) comments on the issue of low student ability: "When students come to Class VIII of our school, their standard is very low. I consider them of Class V and test them . . ." Another ETC-member B-E-2 says about students' lack of interest: "I teach the students of Std. VIII to X in my school. Some of the students in my classroom are having no interest in learning." These statements come at the beginning of the response, suggesting that the ETC-

members tend to relate their thinking to their immediate context. In contrast, the following statements from the non-ETC-members show that their thinking is more abstract and generalized, and does not seem to relate to their own contexts:

Respondent S/N-1, on low ability of students: "Sometimes students who belong to lower strata of society have low ability. They are sometimes detected 'slow learners'".

Respondent B/N-4, on students' lack of interest: "All students are not interested in learning, but some students are more interested in learning. Students who are not interested . . . always try to disturb the class and the teacher while teaching."

Critical Approach to Problems

The narratives reveal that the ETC-members tend to think critically about problems. There are efforts to analyse problems, to guess possible reasons behind them, and to try to visualise various aspects and consequences of the problems. The ETC-members seem interested in gaining a personal understanding of the problems, perhaps in order to find workable solutions. They also attempt to think what a problem may mean or entail in the specific individual context. Respondent S/E-5, an ETC member, says: "Whenever I come across this problem [lack of motivation] I always try to know reasons behind it. I always find the same reason, i.e. our today's traditional methodology of teaching in which students remain passive." Another ETC-member respondent B/E-1 tries to view the problem of large classes in personal terms: "If [there are] 90 students in the classroom, it is impossible for the teacher to pay attention to every student. Class control isn't my problem, my problem is . . . how I can interact with my students."

The narratives of non-ETC-members show that either there is an uncritical acceptance or rejection of an issue as a problem without attempts at understanding, or a general, vague understanding of it sometimes verging on personal prejudice. There are also examples of sweeping generalisation based on isolated, highly individual experiences. A non-ETC-member respondent S/N-1 comments on the problem of large classes: "Now there is a boom in result [i.e. high percentage of successful students] and the government deliberately gives maximum students to the classes and this creates problems." While commenting on the issue of students' lack of interest, respondent B/N-2 has this to say: "Nowadays we see that the students don't seem to be interested in their learning process. They enroll their names in the school and remain absent in the classroom. They don't have any important task to do at their homes. They tell lies to their parents."

Belief in Self-agency

The ETC-members show a tendency towards accepting the presence of problems in their work and working around them. They do not see any reason in blaming others for the persistence of problems in their work. The member-teachers believe that they have agency and they tend to use it as often as possible.

This constructive attitude towards the problems is seen in two ways. Many ETC-members view at least some problems not as problems but as challenges or even opportunities. Most of them tend to seek some positive aspect or some optimism in the problems. The words of respondent B/E-6 seem representative of this attitude: "It [low ability of students] can never be a problem for me. Rather it will be an interesting and challenging task" On the issue of centrally prescribed textbooks, he comments: "Prescribed textbooks have advantages as well as disadvantages." His take on the problem of large classes also seems pragmatic: "Very large classes have become the unavoidable bitter reality of the present education system. Whether one likes it or not, one has to handle the situation in one way or the other."

The second indicator that reflects this constructive and positive attitude is the way the ETC-members show willingness and resourcefulness to try out various solutions, to experiment with their teaching, while being realistic and pragmatic. Most narratives include several examples of how the ETC members have tried within their individual limits to find ways out of the situations that they perceived to be problematic. No narrative by an ETC member includes any suggestion that a particular problem is beyond one's control, or that an individual teacher is helpless, or that there is nothing one can do about a problem. Another point is that no narrative blames students for any problem, not even for their lack of interest. There is recognition of some shortcomings on students' part, but it is accompanied by a sympathetic understanding of their plight.

A contrasting trait is found in the narratives of the non-members. Many narratives betray a complaining and blaming tone, holding various agencies, particularly students and authorities, responsible for the problems. The comments suggest that many non-members would rather not bother with some problems, since they are beyond one's control. An explicit comment by respondent B/N-1 asserts: "Here teachers can't do anything [about prescribed textbooks] because this policy is already decided and planned by authorities." For the problem of large classes, there is a similar pessimistic reaction: "To face this problem is very difficult in private management. It depends upon the management." Another teacher B/N-5 believes that "[M]any students are not interested in learning in rural areas. Because their parents are not interested to give proper and regular education" These words suggest that there is little belief in self-agency among the non-ETC-members.

Pragmatic Approach to Finding Solutions

Not surprisingly, since they show critical awareness of problems and believe in self-agency, the ETC members seem to indulge in individual small-scale efforts--within their limits--to try out ways of addressing the problems they face. Many of these are innovative and imaginative. But one thing seems common in all these efforts--the strategies are mostly realistic, feasible, and manageable, even if some end in failure. A common belief behind all the trials seems to be this: there is no point in crying over what is beyond our control; let us try to do what we can. The range of solutions these teachers have tried for various problems include:

- Taking newspapers and magazines to classrooms
- Using role-play activities
- Experimenting with classroom seating arrangements
- Getting help from "bright" students to support weak ones
- Sending students out on real-life tasks involving interaction in English
- Engaging extra classes to deal with something that is not possible to teach in regular classes
- Using group-correction and peer-correction for checking assignments
- Setting up language games and contests in the classroom
- Designing and using innovative teaching aids

The fact that the handful of narratives provides a long list of strategies for addressing these problems indicates the resourcefulness and pragmatism of these member-teachers in finding out working solutions.

Barring a few isolated suggestions, the narratives of the non-ETC-members do not offer plausible solutions. In some cases, as pointed out earlier, the problems are considered unsolvable and hence not requiring the teacher to do anything. In other cases, the solutions are very general, expecting an agency such as the government or the school management to do something. For example, for the problem of prescribed textbooks, respondent S/N-1 suggests: "instead of syllabi, the authorities should provide curriculum." To address the problem of large classes, respondent B/N-2 suggests: "a better remedy is that limited students should be shifted in the classrooms." The same person expects that "the government should make [the textbooks and reference books] available in the schools. Other equipment like laboratory apparatus should be made available by schools." In those cases where the teacher is exhorted to do something, the "solutions" seem more like general suggestions for the wider teaching community, rather than a practicable strategy for an individual teacher. Some solutions are suggested as general vague statements agreeable to all but not useful to derive any practical ideas from: "We ought to prepare atmosphere so that our students are eager for learning" (B/N-3).

Conclusion

The comparison of the thinking of ETC members with non-ETC-members shows a possible positive impact of the participation in PLCs on the thinking of ETC-members. Belonging to the ETCs appears to have given the member-teachers a kind of personal, professional growth opportunity that was not available to others. Broadly, the ETCs may have changed the teachers in two ways: attitudinal changes and consequent engagement with learning. Britten (1988) observes: "[T]he acquisition of skills goes hand in hand with the acquisition of appropriate attitudes to teacher development. This is necessary because attitudes command skills" (1988, p. 6).

The ETC teachers think about classroom problems in a productive way accepting them as a part of the profession. They believe that they are capable of addressing problems on their own terms and find out working solutions. Further, it is observed that the

search for solutions has led teachers to experiment with various ideas and activities. It has made them think and reflect on the events of classroom life. The ETC members seem more open-minded, considerate and tolerant of the diversity of these things. Finally, the ETC members approach the problems with a belief in self-agency and willingness to go for solutions, while the non-members seem to believe others to be responsible for both the problems and the possible solutions, absolving themselves of any responsibility of trying. In conclusion, we find that the participation in ETCs is associated with a positive impact on the thinking of the member-teachers about their problems.

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